

My BraveNewWorld Essays: Vol. III

by

Alton C. Thompson

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(This also includes essays that Sufyan bin Uzayr has posted (first) on the “newsgrape” site.)

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[June 24, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/06/24/the-frank-answer-to-corruption/>]

The Frank Answer to Corruption

Alton C. Thompson

In a recent interview of [Thomas Frank](#) by [Bill Moyers](#), there was the following exchange. (What prompted the interview was the fact that Frank had recently written [Pity the Billionaire](#) (2012), and “[It’s a Rich Man’s World](#)” for *Harper’s Magazine* a few months ago.)

Bill Moyers: And there's more. One of Senator [Timothy] Johnson's [Chairman if the Senate Banking committee, and a Democrat] former staffers is now one of JPMorgan's chief lobbyists. And the chairman's present top assistant used to be a lobbyist for a law firm that worked for JPMorgan. I mean, this wasn't a hearing. This was a reunion of the Gambino family.[!]

Thomas Frank: Well, look, this is what we call in Washington the revolving door, okay. And this, if your viewers haven't heard of this they need to learn about it right away because this is how Washington D.C. works is that people go back and forth from, typically from Capitol Hill staffs to working for lobby firms or directly for these, you know, the clients of the lobby firms that have to do with the interests that they used to work on when they were on Capitol Hill.

And then they go back and lobby to their former boss, right, and convince him or her to vote one way or the other. And that's how you get ahead in lobbying is you start out working for someone on Capitol Hill, a powerful senator on a given committee. And then you go and essentially sell that expertise, sell that, you know, the fact that your friends with that guy to, you know, to a lobbying firm or to a bank or to whoever. That's totally how it works.

Bill Moyers: It's an interlocking cartel and it's serious business. How can we claim to have a representative government when they really are representing the people who bought the campaigns and not the voters who voted for them? It's a serious question.

In the *economic* realm, the value that has long been extolled (if not practiced!) is that of equality of *opportunity* (rather than equality *per se*). In the *political* realm, however, historically the “push” has been toward citizen *equality*, so that over time the franchise has been extended, we have gained the legal right to vote for U. S. Senators, and the U. S. Supreme Court issued a number of “[one man, one vote](#)” rulings in the 1960s—such as the [Reynolds v. Sims](#) ruling of 1964.

Granted that our national government was not *designed* to be a democracy: Only some were granted the franchise originally; the Senate (members of which those enfranchised could not vote for) was created to act as a check on the House of Representatives (members of which the

enfranchised *could* vote for); and the Executive and Judiciary were created to act as further checks on the citizenry (specifically, the enfranchised). And although over time progress was made in achieving more equality for citizens (as noted above), lately our political system has been moving in the *opposite* direction, and has been becoming ever more incestuous and corrupt:

- Efforts (e.g., in Florida) to purge voting rolls, ostensibly to remove non-citizens from the rolls, but actually to remove elements of the population likely to vote Democratic: A political action posing as a demographic one.
- [Gerrymandering efforts](#), having the aim of “diluting” the value of the votes of the members of certain groups (ones more likely to vote Democratic).
- The possible manipulation of [voting machine](#) results, so that voting becomes a meaningless exercise.
- Bombarding the citizenry with advertisements for candidates, designed by professionals skilled at designing advertisements for (other) products, thereby convincing many to vote for the candidates in question.
- Hiring lobbyists (or working through [ALEC](#)) to write legislation, and then pressuring legislators to introduce it, being enabled to do this by a recent [Supreme Court decision](#). Thus, although Representatives are “theoretically” in office to serve the interests of their constituents, increasingly they have come to serve the interests of their rich donors. And although it should be obvious that if one candidate is able to outspend his/her opponent by a wide margin, and his/her money has come primarily from rich individuals and corporations, that candidate can be expected to serve his/her donors rather than “the people,” “the people” can be so subjected to advertising by that candidate, that citizens will find reasons to vote for that candidate. Such happened in the recent recall election in Wisconsin, where Scott Walker outspent his opponent, Thomas Barrett, by an almost 8 to 1 margin—and was able to win handily (gaining most of his support in rural areas of the state).



Why has this devolution been occurring? I would identify two basic causes:

- The dominant “character” of Americans.
- The historical development of our economy.

[Morris Berman](#) is one of the more astute commentators on our society currently, and in his most recent book in a three-book series ([Why America Failed: The Roots of Imperial Decline](#), 2011; also see Kirkpatrick Sale’s [review](#) of the book, and also this [video](#)), states the [following](#) (as given on the inside flap of the book):

In *Why America Failed*, Berman examines the development of American culture from the earliest colonies to the present, shows that the seeds of the nation's "hustler" culture were sown from the very beginning, and reveals how the very tools that enabled the country's expansion have become the instruments of its demise.

That is, a “hustler” mentality developed very early on in our history, and has been with us ever since—a mentality that has emphasized striving for success, with little or no consideration for how one treats others in one’s upward climb. (Berman cites Sacvan Bercovitch’s [*The Puritan Origins of the American Self*](#), 1975, 2011, as a source here.) Note that this is an interesting assessment of this society, given its claim to be a “Christian” country that honors the teachings of Jesus!

This factor, however, has been what statisticians would refer to as a “*constant*” rather than a variable, so that although it is a *necessary* factor in explaining our recent devolutionary trend, it is the *variable* “the historical development of our economy” which has allowed this “character” factor to “work its magic” in recent years. This is not the place to present a detailed economic history of this country, and such a history is not needed anyway. It’s only necessary to present a brief outline of how our economy has “developed” over time.

Our economy started out as one in which agriculture was the dominant activity, with some in commerce and the trades. Over time, however, commerce grew in importance relative to agriculture, and then manufacturing grew in importance relative to commerce. At present, it is financial firms (e.g., Wall Street firms and banks) which occupy the dominant role in the economy.

As these sectoral changes have been occurring, within industries there has been the differential growth of firms, with some firms gaining monopoly position relative to their rivals (some of this gained through acquisitions of other firms in the same industry). In addition, firms have expanded in size by developing new “product lines,” again using the acquisition vehicle to accomplish that goal in many cases. Also, as firms have grown, they have become tied less and less to this country, and have become entities unto themselves—unconcerned with the welfare of their employees, obsessed with the remuneration of executives and shareholders, and with no loyalty whatsoever to the United States.

Economic firms have always played some role in the political realm, but as firms became ever larger, they began ever more to “use” the political realm to their own economic advantage:

- “Buying” politicians, so that they would vote to support their interests—by eliminating “obnoxious” regulations and putting “favorable” ones in their place; by getting them to spend money (e.g., for wars) in a way that they could profit from those expenditures; etc.

- “Buying” voters, by spending overwhelming amounts of money to convince them to vote a certain way.

An implication of the developments in the economy outlined above is that our society has become extremely inegalitarian, and is becoming ever more so. That is, the *structure* of our society has changed drastically, not only in the economy, but in the society—as the middle class has been reduced in size, more and more are in poverty, and the rich are capturing ever more of the country’s wealth.

Given the structural changes that have occurred in our society, one might expect that Thomas Frank would be aware of those changes, and make recommendations that took those changes into consideration. Instead, here is his recommendation:

Thomas Frank: Look, I have the same problem myself. I also have an answer. I have a solution for it. You want to hear what it is?

Bill Moyers: I do.

Thomas Frank: We need third parties in this country. And by that I don't mean another third party supported by billionaires, that centrist, you know, in the sort of Ross Perot manner. I mean parties that represent different opinions on the spectrum in the manner of the populist party in the 1890s which was really the last time we saw a third party movement, you know, that contested the ballot from the bottom all the way to the top, you know, and they were a real political party. Unfortunately the techniques that the populists used are against the law in most states. If we were to repeal those laws you might have a vibrant third party scene again.

This suggestion has at least two problems:

- It fails to recognize that the structural changes that have been occurring in our society make a (bad) joke of the “one man, one vote” principle. It’s true that one vote still counts as much as it did before, but as I stated earlier, efforts at purging the voting rolls, etc., have made some votes worth much more than others. Given this, the introduction of third parties would play no role in solving that problem—and one would need to be living in a fantasy world to believe otherwise.
- It is not *future-oriented*. It shows no cognizance of the very real possibility that the “global warming” that is occurring will wipe out most of the world’s population within a few decades; and with that occurring, it is inevitable that our society will collapse—including our economic and political systems. Thus, even were Frank’s third party “solution” implemented, and even if it “worked” to some degree, it would “work” only for a short time: As our society began to disintegrate, political parties *per se* would begin to disappear, of course.

Thomas Frank is an admirable person. But like so many who are good at *analyzing* our society, when it comes to making *recommendations*, he proves himself “out of his element.” As Morris Berman has [noted](#), too many of our intellectuals have a narrow focus, so that they see the trees but not the forest. If we are to survive the devastation coming our way, courtesy of “global warming,” we must recognize the threat, determine how best to respond to that threat, and then act.

This is not to say that the corruption problem that Frank has identified is not important. If one takes a longer-range view, however, one will recognize that that problem pales in importance in comparison with the threat posed by “global warming,” and that it is *that* problem, not the problem of corruption, that warrants our primary attention. However, as we act in response to that threat, let us do so in a manner such that corruption in a future New Society will be next to impossible!

[June 25, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/06/25/that-clear-eyed-paul-craig-roberts/>]

That Clear-Eyed Paul Craig Roberts!

Alton C. Thompson

Paul Craig Roberts—formerly an editor of the *Wall Street Journal* and an Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Treasury—never ceases to amaze me. His [picture](#) shows him to be a clear-eyed man—and his writings continually *demonstrate* that fact. Among his comments in his recent “Silent Spring for Us?” are the following:

Once abundant clean water has become a scarce resource. Yet, in the US ground water and surface water are being polluted and made unusable by mountain top removal mining, fracking and other such “new technologies.” Ranchers in eastern Montana, for example, are being forced out of ranching by polluted water.

Offshore oil drilling and chemical farming run-off have destroyed fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico. In other parts of the world, explosives used to maximize short-run fish catches have destroyed coral reefs that sustained fish life (<http://aquatek-california.com/coral-reef-destruction/>). Deforestation for short-run agricultural production results in replacing bio-diverse rain forests with barren land. The “now generation” is leaving a resource-scarce planet to future generations.

Nuclear power plants are thoughtlessly built in [earthquake](#) and [tsunami](#) zones. Spent fuel rods are stored within the plants, a practice that adds their destructive potential to a catastrophic accident or act of nature.

One would not expect such comments from a person who was formerly an editor of the *Wall Street Journal*—but Roberts is clearly an exceptional person—a person who is not captive to any ideology. Thus, Roberts not only recognizes that we humans have been foolish in not understanding the fact that we are a *part of* Earth System, rather than being *apart from* it, but understands that that foolishness constitutes a threat to our very continued existence as a species: Initially, our foolishness will “merely” make our lives difficult and miserable, but eventually it will make them *impossible*.

Roberts’ explanation of our situation:

Businesses have no incentive to take these costs into account, because to do so reduces their profits and could indicate that the full cost of production exceeds the value of the output. Governments have proven to be largely ineffective in controlling external costs, because of the ability of private interests to influence the decisions of government. Even if one country were to confront these costs, other countries would take advantage of the situation. Companies that externalize some of their costs can undersell

companies that internalize all of the costs of their production. Thus, the planet can be destroyed by the short-term profit and convenience interests of one generation.

This explanation might be regarded as a “[first-stage](#)” [explanation](#) (to use [Richard B. Braithwaite](#)’s [1900 – 1990] terminology), with [Morris Berman](#)’s emphasis on our being a “hustler” society being a “second-stage” explanation—i.e., a more “[radical](#)” one (in the sense of getting to the root). Still, first-stage explanations—such as the one offered by Roberts—*do* have value, in that they help us identify what *directly* explains the [explanandum](#) in question.

The question that arises regarding explanations *per se*, however, is: Of what *value* are they? Do they merely satisfy our intellectual curiosity, or do they (also) have *practical* value? After all, when we ask the “Why?” question, is this done simply to satisfy a need for *understanding* or, rather, is it because we are aware of a situation regarding which we have made a *negative* valuation (at least implicitly), the implication being that we would prefer that situation to be *different* from what it is—with the only way for that situation to *be* different being that someone—such as oneself—attempt to *change* the situation? That is, when we ask the “Why?” question, isn’t this an indication that we are *dissatisfied* with something, and would like to see it *changed*?

But if what *motivated* our asking the “Why?” question was a sense of dissatisfaction with something, is this a *rational* response to our sense of dissatisfaction? Perhaps the rationality of this response depends somewhat on *what* has motivated our feeling dissatisfied. However, I tend to think that our response is too often of the “knee-jerk” variety. That is, rather than asking ourselves whether it might be *useful* to seek an explanation, we simply *assume*, tacitly, that it would be, then ask “Why?,” and then seek an answer.

I have three comments relative to the above discussion, the first two pertaining to Roberts, the third of a more general nature:

- Roberts has done us a very real service in identifying several serious problems that face us humans at present—problems to which I have made no reference in any of my essays. I am perplexed, however by the fact that Roberts did not include “global warming” in his discussion. It would be foolish to claim that “global warming” is a *more* important problem than any of those discussed by Roberts, but it certainly *is* an important problem.
- Usually one offers an explanation—whether first- or second-stage—as a prelude to a recommendation(s) as to how to “fix” the problem that one has identified. And usually one uses the “lever model” in doing so. That is, one identifies the factor(s) that one believes explains one’s *explanandum*, determines which factor(s) would be most easily changed (i.e., which seem(s) to be the best candidate(s) as a lever or levers), and then recommends that that factor(s) be changed (*how*, is, of course, another question![1]). Thus, if one identifies, as the basic causal factor behind our various problems, our

“hustler” mentality (as Morris Berman has), one will, logically, make recommendations as to how to *change* that mentality. (So far as I know—I am currently reading his *Why America Failed*, and so cannot be definitive here—Berman offers *no such recommendations*!) If one offers an explanation but then fails to offer any recommendations *based* on that explanation, one has a right to ask: “What was the point of your offering an explanation?! You have offered us nothing useful!”

Unfortunately, although Roberts has offered us an explanation for the problems—and they certainly *are* important ones—that he has identified, he has failed to take the next step—that of offering us with a “plan” for fixing those problems. Roberts concludes his essay by stating “. . . the question, ‘silent spring for us?’ is not merely rhetorical. It is real.” This is a *true* statement, but not particularly *useful*. I would *like* to think that this failure stems from a recognition, on his part, that he has nothing useful to offer on the matter, but believed that his essay was worth publishing anyway because it might motivate some *reader* to pursue a solution.

- As I stated above, when we are faced with a situation to which we react negatively—*implicitly* asserting that the situation should be something other than what it is—we almost seem “programmed” to ask “Why?,” tacitly assuming that an answer to that question will be *helpful* in addressing the problem.

This is a tendency that may be difficult to overcome, but we must *try* to overcome it anyway. Perhaps it’s simply because my mind tends to work differently than the “normal” human being’s mind, or perhaps it’s because of a previous exposure to [John Dewey’s pragmatic thinking](#), but when I’m faced with a problem, my tendency is to ask: “How can it be fixed?”

Thus, in learning about the problem of “global warming” and its causes, I have been—without even thinking about it—“radical” in my thinking in that I have looked beyond the immediate, and even deeper, causes, and have worked out as the solution: “We need a change in our *way of life*, either in the direction of more of us becoming homesteaders or—and preferably—more of us creating cooperative eco-communities in “safe” locations.” I have recognized that this solution has the potential of saving only *some* of us, but not being aware of any better solution, have concluded that *some* is better than *none*.

Note that this solution has no *obvious* relationship to any explanation of why “global warming” is occurring; but for me, what’s relevant is not *that* fact but, rather, the strong possibility (I would like to believe!) that if this “plan” were to be implemented, at least some lives would be saved. That’s good enough for me!

Endnote

1. Typically, however, the tacit assumption is that given that governments have the legal responsibility to address problems, it is a governmental unit that should do the fixing.

Our Penchant for Self-Deception

Alton C. Thompson

Our penchant for self-deception likely gets expressed in a number of ways. In this essay, however, I limit my attention to the so-called “American Dream” (which I continually put in quotation marks, because of the self-deception it involves.) This “Dream” has two components, the *nature* of the “dream” itself, and a “theory” as to *how* one achieves that “dream.”

The “dream” itself is a not a dream in a literal sense—e.g., the type of dream that occupied [Sigmund Freud](#) [1856 – 1939]; rather, it is a *goal* (actually, a *series* of goals), what one is expected to aspire to in this society. The goals associated with this “Dream” include the following:

- Having good housing—and preferably being the *owner* of that housing.
- Having at least one automobile, and more if there is a need for more. (Historically, the automobile has been for the husband’s use, in traveling to work, taking one’s wife shopping, taking the family to church, etc. Lately, however, as more wives have entered the work force—those able to get jobs, that is!—a second automobile has been part of that “Dream,” and as children reach driving age, they also may have—or think they have—a need for an automobile as well, for dating, etc.).
- Obtaining as high a level an education for oneself as possible, and for one’s children as well, when they are old enough to attend an educational institution. Private schooling is, of course, preferable to public schooling (because, in having a higher cost, more status is associated with such schooling).
- Having enough income to afford annual vacations with the family.
- Being secure in one’s retirement.

These, then, are some of the major components of the “American Dream.” How is one expected to *achieve* the Dream? One of two ways:

- Starting a business, and working hard at “growing” it, with the hope that it will continue to grow in size—i.e., gross income, profit, number of employees, etc.

- Obtaining the sort of education/training that will enable one to obtain a high-paying job with an existing firm, then “putting one’s nose to the grindstone” so that one will “rise” in the firm over time—perhaps even reaching the top.

One is *not* expected to achieve the “American Dream” by inheriting money—so that one has no need either to start a business or become an employee; nor is one expected to obtain a job through any factor other than merit—i.e., innate ability combined with proper education/training. Factors, that is, such as family connections, the club connections of one’s father, members of the church that one attends, etc., are not to be factors in realizing the “Dream.”

If this is the “American Dream” as commonly understood—i.e., the “Dream” in theory—the *realities* of the “Dream” are rather different—so that it involves self-deception:

- Given what the “Dream” assumes regarding how one *achieves* it (i.e., one achieve it by, and *only* by, working hard, etc.), the “theory” behind the “Dream” implies that it one can legitimately *infer* from a given person’s degree of achievement of that “Dream” *how* s/he achieved it. That is, the inference that seemingly can be drawn is that if one possesses the various elements of the “Dream,” this means not merely that one *possesses* them but *deserves* them—because one, e.g., *worked* for them—either via self-employment or being a good employee. Such an inference is not warranted, however, and for several reasons; this, then, is one aspect of the “Dream’s” self-deception. Here are some of the reasons why the above-mentioned inference is invalid:
 - It ignores the role that government has played, over the decades, in enabling our citizens to obtain at least a part of that “Dream.” For example, the [Homestead Act](#) of 1862, signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln—a law that enabled people to obtain land free-of-charge, but requiring those obtaining such land to fulfill certain obligations. “Eventually 1.6 million homesteads were granted and 270,000,000 acres (420,000 sq mi) of federal land were privatized between 1862 and 1934, a total of 10% of all lands in the United States. Homesteading was discontinued in 1976, except in Alaska, where it continued until 1986.” The [New Deal](#) program instituted under President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression of the 1930s is another major example.
 - It ignores the possibility of someone obtaining that “Dream” via the inheritance of a large sum of money.
 - It ignores the possibility of someone Third, it ignores the fact that “connections” have long played a major role, whether it is for obtaining money to start a business or to get a good job.

- *Where* one is born and grows up in this country (socially and/or geographically) can play a huge role in one's degree of "success"—in part because one has a better chance for "success" if one grows up in a city rather than a rural area, in part because one who has developed a "[pecuniary](#)" mentality has a better chance of becoming "successful" than one who has developed an "industrial" one. (Which of these mentalities one develops depends more on one's social background than the geographical location of one's upbringing.)
- The "theory" assumes that if one has achieved success, this is because one has innate ability, has acquired the knowledge/skills necessary for "success," and/or has applied oneself diligently—doing so, however, while working within the existing legal system. That is, it assumes away the possibility that one could become "successful" by leading a life of crime. These assumptions regarding "what it takes" to become "successful" also involve self-deception, for they ignore several facts, among them:
 - One's "success" *may*, in fact, be gained via criminal activity. Or, if one is very wealthy, one may use the influence that that "buys" to have laws *changed* so that illegal activities *become* legal (!)—and thereby to one's advantage financially. Whereas in the past "success" via such factors would have been viewed by others with moral approbation, over the past century or so the matter of *how* one has gained one's wealth has become less so subject—in part, perhaps, because the *complexity* of the modern world makes it difficult for one to *learn*—or even *understand*—how the rich have obtained their wealth.
 - Although the tacit assumption associated with the "American Dream" is that the actions engaged in in pursuing it are honorable, moral, etc., one reviewer of Walter A. McDougall's [Freedom Around the Corner: A New American History: 1585 – 1828](#), 2004, states that:

His one thesis is that Americans have always been hustlers in both senses of the word—hard workers and scammers. This gives the work [i.e., McDougall's book] a tendency to shy away from Big Deep Ideas and philosophical cant.

The questions of *how* and *why* this country developed as a nation of "hustlers" are questions of interest and importance—but are beyond the scope of this essay. I *can* note, however, that *regardless* of how the process started, once it did it had implications for how the *society itself* developed—and *that* had/has implications for why might have a hustler mentality. That is, the development of a hustler mentality (a) affected what sorts of *physical facilities* and *institutions* developed. It (b) affected (as Morris Berman has argued, in [Why America Failed: The Roots of Imperial Decline](#), 2012) *technological development*, in that it acted as a spur to such development. He has stated:

The “geographical frontier was declared officially closed in 1890, leaving a psychological vacuum that got quickly filled by the technological frontier.” (p. 74)

And has added:

“Without this belief system [in, i.e., technological “progress”], Americans would have literally nothing, for it lies at the heart of the American Dream and the endlessly vaunted American way of life.” (p. 82)

Thus, our society’s development has been shaped *directly* by a “hustler” mentality, but also *indirectly* in that that mentality (along with a loss of the frontier) has been a spur to technological development, which development, in turn, has helped shaped the “built” and institutional environments of this country. Because of this, anyone who grow up in this society will tend to acquire a hustler mentality *as a matter of course*; and if one does *not* develop such a mentality (which is rare, but not unknown—a point that Berman gives some attention to in his book), one will find that one’s “alternate” mentality has little in the way of “success value.”

- The “theory” of the American Dream suggests that “success” comes from, and *only* from, such variables as hard work—and as McDougall has noted, working hard has long been an important feature of our society. More accurately, however, he uses the term “hustling,” a term that he gives *two* meanings—working hard *and/or* being a “scammer.” The point that I wish to make here, however, is that pursuit of the “American Dream” has effects on both oneself and others, and that because those effects are often of a *negative* sort, this pursuit involves self-deception.
 - “Work” involves not only work *per se* but the time to travel to and from one’s place of employment. Work is, of course, necessary for humans as a means to obtain one’s necessities. But work can become all-consuming, so that it becomes a substitute for *living*. That is, there is perhaps an “optimal” amount of work for one to engage in, with too little causing suffering for oneself and one’s dependents (because it results in too little income), but too much having the same effects—*plus* endangering one’s health. Many in our society are too frenetic in their activities, and endanger their well-being in so doing. The fact that the “American Dream” overlooks this important point can be construed to mean that the “Dream” involves self-deception.
 - As to the “scammer” part of McDougall’s discussion of hustling, this is an “unmentionable” in our society—for it is the *negative* side of hustling. It is this part of hustling that involves people engaging in activities that can be hurtful to others, without even a consciousness of that fact—because in effect one becomes

a “possessed” person who is oblivious of one’s surroundings, human and otherwise. Not only does this result in “screw your buddy” behavior, but an *absence* of any demonstration of concern for one’s fellows—whether through direct action (e.g., volunteer work) or giving to charitable causes. Given that such behavior—and non-behavior—is directly contrary to the teachings of the Bible (interpreted, as I do, in “thrust” terms—see Chapter 1 of my [eBook](#)), and that Christians and Jews are the most important religious segments of our population, the prevalence of such behavior in our society speaks volumes about the emptiness of our religious claims.

In the popular press and on television one will learn from time to time how for more and more of our citizens the “American Dream” has become ever more difficult to achieve—ever more an illusion. Usually, of course, the “tone” of such presentations is such as to suggest that this is an *unfortunate* trend—and in certain respects it certainly is (i.e., many are homeless, and don’t know where their next meal will come from). But there’s more to the failure of the “American Dream” than the highly unfortunate fact of homelessness:

Morris Berman (who tends to emphasize the “scammer” part of McDougall’s concept of hustling) has stated (p. 57): “We’ll carry on hustling until we literally collapse from it (2008 being only a mild preview); this much is clear” And (p. 64): “We are witnessing the suicide of a nation, a nation that hustled its way into the grave.” I agree with Berman that *internal* factors—such as the dominance of a hustling mentality—are leading our society to ruin, but would add that “global warming”—an external factor (except in the sense that we humans are responsible for it!)—*is also* likely to result in societal collapse here and elsewhere. In fact, it appears that we are facing a “double whammy” from which we cannot escape.

Pursuit the “American Dream” has various unintended side effects, among them that it results (in terms of the existing societal context) in the emission of “greenhouse” gases, the accumulation of which in the atmosphere results in “global warming.” “Global warming” is a term that encompasses a number of atmospheric phenomena in addition to warming *per se*, and climate scientists have been warning that they will result in disaster for our species—first societal collapse, and then a severe culling of the human population—perhaps to the point of extinction!

Berman adds (p. 184), in his discussion, that “. . . collapse could be a good thing, if not exactly fun to live through. The entire premise of America was a mistake from the beginning.” These are strong words, but express a point of view that I have also presented—specifically in my [“Thank You, Deniers!”](#) Berman goes on to state (p 184) that given “the historical record [of this country], the American exit will not be a graceful one; it’s not in our DNA. [I assume that Berman is being figurative rather than literal here.] But even beyond that, the collapse could

conceivably open the door to the alternative tradition discussed in this book, the world of Emerson and Thoreau and Mumford and Vance Packard and the South (without slavery).”

I will grant that all of the above gentlemen—including even Vance Packard!—have done some important writing, but Berman’s reference here to a group of *writers* suggests to me that he is not unduly alarmed regarding the threat posed by “global warming”—e.g., the possibility that the various phenomena associated with “global warming” will cull most of the world’s population by the end of this century—perhaps within the next 50 years, in fact. If Berman gave this threat the seriousness it deserved, he would have recommended reading about the many “intentional communities” that graced our past (e.g., the Shakers, New Harmony, Oneida, etc.; for a short article see [this](#)), and also reading about contemporary such communities (such as Twin Oaks; see this [directory](#)).

We Americans have deceived ourselves about how easy it is to attain the “American Dream,” but more importantly we have deceived ourselves regarding the *implications* of the mentality that drives that “Dream. For *internal* reasons (e.g., ones emphasized by Berman) as well as the *external* factor of “global warming,” our course is downward—and likely to eventuate not only in societal collapse, but a severe culling of not only the population of the United States, but that of the world (perhaps, in fact, to the point of extinction).

There *is* some reason for hope, and I have used many essays on this site to develop that point. But that hope will bear fruition only if *acted* on—and *appropriately*. Even then, however, Gaia offers us no guarantee that even those who make an effort to survive will do so. This is not, of course, “good news,” but is what I sincerely believe—because I’m convinced that such a view is what follows logically from the trends that are occurring at present.

On Fear and Its Absence

Alton C. Thompson

It is perfectly natural to have fears—whether one is living in 2012 CE or 2012 BCE. Today, for example, one’s fears might include one or more of the following:

- Spiders and bugs.
- Being in a crowd.
- Heights—especially if one can clearly see how far down,vertically, the ground is below.
- Related to this: Flying in an airplane. (Note that I am not referring to [Erica Jong’s](#) book here!)
- Being on a body of water, even if one has a life preserver with you to help prevent you from drowning.
- Riding with a teenage driver.
- Neighborhood rowdies with a reputation of destroying property.
- Having an accident that might reduce one to a “vegetable,” and thereby incapable of taking care of oneself.
- Becoming gravely ill—because of an inability to pay the doctor/hospital bills associated with the illness.
- Being robbed—including being burglarized.
- Being attacked and then raped or otherwise brutalized, and even kidnapped.
- Getting fired—and thereby possibly losing one’s home, and being forced to go on “welfare.”
- Related to this: Losing one’s job because one’s employer either moves to a different location (perhaps in a different country, in fact) or because it goes bankrupt.
- Being a “failure” in life.
- Dying.

- One's wife's cooking. (I just couldn't resist adding a little humor to a list that is rather depressing!)

Some of these fears are more rational than others—i.e., with some there is real danger, or at least discomfort, and therefore a good reason to have fear. (I, for one, have *never* feared my wife's cooking!) Also, what may cause one to be fearful when one is *young*, may not do so when one grows older; and, of course, the fears that *one* person has do not necessarily match those of another. My concern in this essay, however, is not so much with the fears that we *have*—whether or not justified—but the fears that we *do not* have—but *should* have.

Actually, I identify just *one* fear that we should have, that of our *way of life*, with my focus being on *why* we should fear it. Because a way of life, by its very nature is somewhat of an abstraction rather than a clearly observable reality, it is understandable why one might have difficulty fearing one's way of life. In addition, there are no *obvious* reasons why one should harbor such a fear—especially given the abstract nature of “way of life.”

My thesis here, however, is that our way of life is a *causal factor*, and as such is the cause of many, if not most, of our problems. I realize that this is a difficult thesis to accept, given the “obvious” fact that problems can virtually always be attributed to *bad choices* by specific individuals. There may be merit in such a “theory,” but it tacitly assumes that *decisions* always result from *choices*, end of story. But *is* this the “end of the story”? I would answer in the negative, arguing that, e.g., one's *context*—in this case the dominant “way of life” of the society within which one lives—plays a huge role in one's decision-making. (Note that the members of a given society will typically have different “lifestyles,” but will share a common “way of life.”)

It's true that numerous individual decisions—some involving choice, others not—were involved in *shaping* the way of life that we have today. But for most of us today, our way of life—although it changes during our lives, and we notice this as we grow older—is something that we tend to take as a “given”—i.e., something we take for granted. We do so, in part, because most of us are not *aware* of any other way of life—either through our traveling or our television watching or our reading. And even if one *is* aware of alternate ways of life, one finds that one is virtually *forced* to accept the way of life that is “offered” to one as a member of one's society, and learn to adapt to it as best one can. This latter statement is not quite true—a fact that gives us some cause for optimism, and a fact that I will therefore comment on later—but is close enough to the truth for my initial purpose here.

To say that our way of life is the *ultimate* cause of (most of) our problems, is (in *my* mind, at any rate) to suggest that the *reason* for this is that it does not accord well with our biological needs (or “design specifications,” to put it differently). And *that* suggestion leads to the question: What *are* our needs? I would list the following four needs as especially basic:

- To ingest certain *substances*—and not others.
- To be exposed to certain *stimuli*—and not others.
- To engage in certain *behaviors*—and not others.
- To use our *brains* in certain ways—and not others.

The above list could form the basis for an extended discussion, but such a discussion is beyond the scope of the current essay. I offer the list simply to make the point that if problems exist in a society, the suggestion is that the *reason* for this is that the society's way of life is discordant with our biology as humans (see Chapters 2 – 4 of my [eBook](#)).

Interestingly, in one of the older commentaries on our society's problems—*Society With Tears*, by [Irving Sarnoff](#) (formerly a Professor of Psychology), 1966—the author commented that (p. 11) “most of my fellow laborers in the vineyards of social science still seem to be at peace with their society.” This is an ironic fact in that it suggests that those in our society with the *most* knowledge about our society and its problems tend to *do* little to “sound the alarms” or engage in efforts at amelioration. What Prof. Sarnoff found particularly disturbing was that (p. 12) some were “too willing to accept employment as technicians and consultants in military or industrial projects whose ultimate social effects may be damaging, repugnant, or horrifying to them.”

I would list the following as among the problems common in our society that have their roots in our way of life. This is not to say that *all* of our problems are rooted in our way of life—for the racism, homophobia, etc., that are still too rampant in our society would seem to be only *partially* caused by our way of life. My list:

- Physical illnesses having a psychosomatic basis.
- Mental illnesses.
- Problematic marriages—some of which end in divorce, and with those that *don't* bringing great pain to those trapped in them. (Those who remain in bad marriages tend to sacrifice their own pain for the good of their family members—and deserve medals for doing so!)
- Drug abuse.
- Alcohol abuse.
- Crimes of various sorts.

I could quote statistics as to the severity of these problems, and how that severity has varied over time; but as such information is readily available on the internet, e.g., I will eschew any reference

to such data. Suffice it to say that I think that there is good reason for believing that *all* of these problems (plus others, I'm sure!) have their basis in our way of life. Perhaps that fact *in itself* should not engender fear in us, but there *are* reasons why it should. That is, once we identify the component of our way of life that is the “driving” factor, we see that that factor has implications beyond playing a role in causing problems such as those listed above to something more ominous—and thereby deserving of fear on our part.

Morris Berman, in his recently-published (2012) [*Why America Failed: The Roots of Imperial Decline*](#), argues that a “hustler” mentality—in its negative sense—has been the dominant mentality in our country from the very beginning, and that our *actions* in accord with this mentality are destroying our society. He states, e.g., (pp. 55 – 56) that in “a culture defined by hustling, cash is the end-all of life for literally everybody. This is why there is finally no use blaming Goldman Sachs or the corporate crowd exclusively [for our recent economic problems], because Wall Street and Main Street pretty much converge.” (An interesting observation, worthy of being given careful consideration.) He continues (p. 57): “We’ll carry on hustling until we [as a *society*, that is] literally collapse from it (2008 being only a mild preview); this much is clear” And (p. 163): “It’s more common to go out with a whimper rather than a bang, in a long, strung-out process of disintegration; and that is what we are currently engaged in.” In short, Berman argues, at length, the thesis that *internal* factors—most notably the driving force in our society’s way of life—have been operating in such a way that their “destination” is clearly—to him—a gradual disintegration of our society, that process of disintegration being underway at present. This is something that we *should* fear, folks!

I agree fully with Berman on this matter, but would add that there is also an *external* factor at work that we should also fear. The factor that I am referring to here is that complex of atmospheric phenomena that have been given the label “global warming”—a misnomer of a term in that it involves not only a trend in warming, but also an increase in the number of storms, an increase in their severity, and increased variability in weather conditions during any given year, and from year to year. Strictly speaking, this is not an *external* factor in that it is *human activities*—most notably our burning of fossil fuels—that has been the cause: That burning has resulted in a transfer of carbon safely locked away under the earth’s surface to the atmosphere, thereby resulting in an accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere—i.e., an increased “greenhouse effect.” In other words, it has resulted in more and more long-wave heat energy emanating from earth being “trapped” in the lower atmosphere—the name given to this phenomenon being “global warming.”

As I have noted in various previous essays on this site, many climate scientists recognize that we should fear this development; only a few, however, such as James Hansen, James Lovelock, and Kevin Anderson have had the courage to be very vocal about the matter. Unfortunately those who *have* articulated their concerns have tended to direct their remarks to our *political leaders*,

while also allowing us “grunts” to listen in. This, I believe, is a serious mistake, for as I have argued in previous essays on this site, given that our governments are under control of the elite—and members of that “select” group, curiously, seem to have no interest in the possibility that the future will be rather unpleasant (including for them!)—it is simply *foolish* to look to governments for “salvation.”

As I have argued in previous essays, two courses of action are rational—given the high probability that our society will be collapsing within a few decades. One is to purchase a parcel of land at a “safe” location, and become a self-sufficient homesteader. The other option (the preferable one, in my view) is to join with others and form a small cooperative eco-community—one that strives to be as “community-sufficient” as possible.

We *should* be fearful of our way of life, given that it is leading us toward catastrophe. But, “I fear,” few *are*—and are therefore in for a “rude awakening.” Let us hope that more awaken to the dim prospects we face as humans, and out of fear for that future begin to act—and ASAP—to engage in adaptive activities calculated to enable their “salvation” (insofar as that is possible). The problem here, however, is that fear tends to have a *paralyzing* effect on people—meaning that there is a greater likelihood that people will withdraw into a cocoon than engage in the sorts of activities that might “save” them. Who was it that said that our species was the most intelligent of all the species?!

[June 30, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/06/30/pdf-some-preliminary-thoughts-about-societies/>]

Some Preliminary Thoughts About Societies: I

Alton C. Thompson

At times, while reading, I encounter statements which I immediately perceive as glib, and which therefore make me realize that the author lacks a thorough understanding of the topic at hand, and is “faking it.” At other times, while reading, I encounter statements which, at the time don’t strike me as glib, and may even strike me as insightful. Upon further reflection, however, I come to realize that I have been duped, and I therefore not only lose respect for the author in question, but feel embarrassed that I was “taken in.”

I may simply let that feeling of embarrassment pass, but at times it motivates to think about the subject at hand more deeply than I had been doing, and may then arrive at, not necessarily a set of new truths, but at least a set of new hypotheses.

Recently I read Morris Berman’s *Why America Failed: The Roots of Imperial Decline* (2012), in which the concept of “hustling” plays a prominent role. Evidently Berman derived this concept from Walter A. McDougall’s *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History: 1585-1828* (2004). I have not read McDougall’s book, but learned from a reviewer of the book that: “If McDougall has a point of view, it is that of a mild cynic. His one thesis is that Americans have always been hustlers in both senses of the word—hard workers and scammers.” Now a definition of “[scam](#)” is “A fraudulent business scheme; a swindle,” with “scammer” defined as “a person who swindles you by means of deception or fraud.”

One type of “scammer” is a “con artist,” and there are some [interesting facts](#) regarding such people, e.g., “A **confidence artist** is an individual operating alone or in concert with others who exploits characteristics of the human psyche such as [dishonesty](#) and [honesty](#), [vanity](#), [compassion](#), [credulity](#), [irresponsibility](#), [naivety](#) and [greed](#).” That is, a “con artist” sort of “scammer”—is a person whose morals are in question, because s/he is willing, and even eager, to take advantage of others. On the other hand, however, what makes the activities of con artists successful is that there are people “out there” who can be taken advantage of, in part because of their ignorance, but more importantly because they have characteristics similar to con artists themselves!

That is, both tend to be greedy, and to be attracted to “get rich quick” schemes. Neither tends to be a rich person, because a rich person is *already* rich. Both, rather, tend to be at the lower end of the economic scale, but both have a strong (irrational?) desire to be rich, and to become rich in a manner whose “shadiness” is not an issue for either. Paradoxically, because both members of

the couple have many characteristics in common, that similarity is precisely what makes the con artist's effort successful: Those with the above characteristics having a talent for being *parasites* have an ability to identify those most likely to serve as their hosts (i.e., others much like themselves, but lacking a talent for parasitism)—and then “sucker” them.

I find it hard to believe that when McDougall accused Americans as having been “scammers” from the very beginning, he had in mind that they were swindlers—or even con artists. (Because I haven't read his book, I don't know the precise meaning that he gave the term in his book—assuming, that is, that he *did* give it a clear meaning.) And as I reflect on Berman's use of the term “hustler” in *Why America Failed* (a book that I *have* read), I now wonder what precise meaning that Berman had in mind in using the term—and must admit that I simply don't know. On the one hand, this bothers me—the fact that I had been “taken in” by Berman; on the other hand, however, the fact that Berman did not give “hustler” a clear meaning causes me to have a diminished level of respect for him.

I am embarrassed by the fact that while I was reading Berman's book, and when I encountered “hustler,” I never bothered to ask myself: How is Berman defining the term? I guess that I assumed that he meant that Americans are people who are “on the go” in the sense that they tend to orient their lives to pursuit of the “almighty dollar,” and in doing so let that motivation dominate their lives—so that they become oblivious to any “toes” that they might step on in their “climb to the top,” and are so self-oriented that they are utterly lacking in empathy for the “less fortunate” in this society. This is how I interpreted Berman when, e.g., he stated (p. 59) “To me, the worst type of fallout from the hustling life is the emotional climate in which American citizens are forced to live,” and (p. 60) “. . . numbness in the face of other humans beings . . . is the essence of the American way of life.” But if my *interpretation* of what he meant by “hustling” was *actually* what he meant, my question now is whether Berman made a wise choice in using the term “hustler”—and I would now conclude that Berman used the term because it is a *striking* term—a term that one notices—rather than one that was *properly* used.

When Berman stated (p. 184) that given “the historical record [of the United States], the American exit will not be a graceful one; it's not in our DNA,” it's clear that he did not mean to make the *literal* claim that we Americans have a *genetic* predisposition to behave in a certain way. Rather, his intention (I believe) was to say that, historically we have displayed certain behavioral tendencies, and that because they have persisted for such a long time, one might *conclude* that they have a genetic basis—but that the *actual* reasons for this persistence are that we have become habituated to such behavior and have created a society for ourselves that virtually *forces* us to behave that way. I am here, of course, putting words in Berman's mouth, but would argue that this is what he actually *meant* to say. I wish, then, that he actually *had* done so (!)—because to be ambiguous in the meanings that one is attaching to terms is to mislead

people. With parables ambiguity is a *virtue*, but with discursive works such as Berman's it is decidedly *not* a virtue.

What about "hustling," then? Is my interpretation (given above) as to what Berman meant by that term correct, but that in *his* using the term, and by not giving the term a clear meaning, he was potentially misleading his readers? To use a given word for "effect" might be acceptable in, e.g., poetry, but is it acceptable in discursive writing? Was the meaning that Berman associated with "hustler" *just* that of my interpretation above, or did it also include the meaning of "con artist" (defined above)? Indeed, did he *principally* mean con artist in using the term?

These are the questions that now come to my mind, and I am embarrassed that they didn't come to my mind while I was reading his book. I guess that I just have to recognize that as a human I am bound to make many mistakes while on the path of life, should simply accept this as a "fact of life," and try to learn from the mistakes that I make.

In my recent "[Our Penchant for Self-Deception](#)" I made some reference to Berman's *Why America Failed*, and now realize that there are ambiguities in Berman's book that I did not fully recognize at the time. I *could*, therefore, be critical of Berman for this fact; on the other hand, however, the presence of those ambiguities has caused me to do some thinking about societies and how they "operate." At this point my thoughts are somewhat tentative, but in Part II present them anyway.

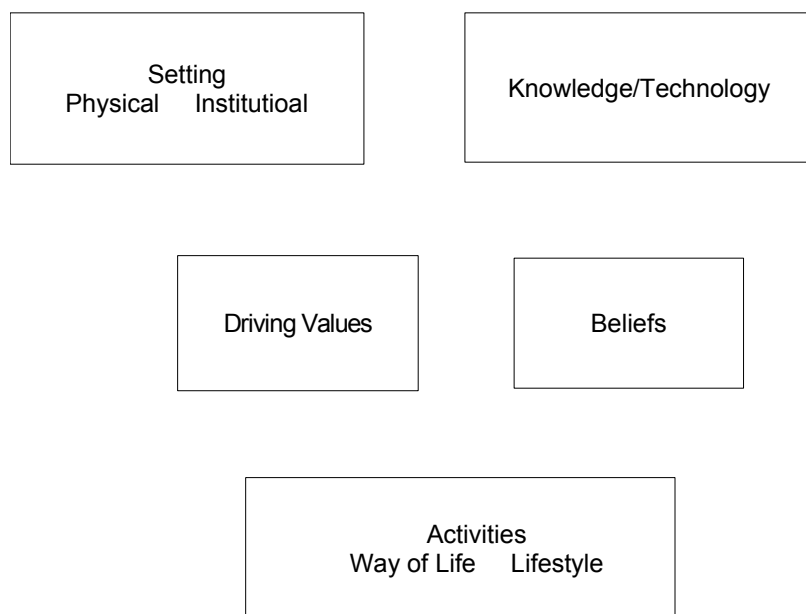
[June 30, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/06/30/pdf-some-preliminary-thoughts-about-societies/>]

Some Preliminary Thoughts About Societies: II

Alton C. Thompson

In Part I of this essay I gave some background for the present essay, mentioning that my reflections on deficiencies that I had perceived in Morris Berman’s *Why America Failed* (2012) had led me to develop some preliminary ideas regarding societies and their “operation” and development. My starting point in developing those ideas was to identify meaningful categories as to the components of a society, and the tentative results of my efforts so far are illustrated in the figure below:

SOCIETAL COMPONENTS



Note that the figure only identifies components, and does not indicate any *linkages* between the components. The absence of linkages in part reflects the tentative nature of my thinking at present, in part reflects my intention of describing such linkages *verbally*.

My intent here is to look at societal components from two perspectives. First, to offer an explanation of the contents of a given box at a *given moment of time*; and, second, to look at the boxes developmentally—the

developments that have occurred with a given component, and how those various developments interact, and have interacted, one with another. As my discussion here is of a very preliminary nature, my comments on either matter will be somewhat lacking in detail—and are of a tentative nature.

Let me begin here with some general comments on the “boxes” above:

I think of a “society” here primarily as a set of people who are engaging in activities. Some of those activities allow us to say that the society has a certain *way of life*, other activities that within the society there are a number of *lifestyles*. “Way of life” activities pertain particularly to those activities associated with the realm of *work*; “lifestyle” activities are associated with the realm of *leisure*, there being some overlap in the activities associated with the various lifestyle groups (e.g., shopping for food is common to all).

The various activities associated with the people who constitute a society occur not only within certain geographical borders, but a certain *setting* within that area. That setting includes *physical* things such as structures, roads, and goods, and also *institutions* (such as political ones). In addition, knowledge and technology present in the society might be thought of as part of that setting, although I have not so labeled them on the figure. At any rate, I put them on the same horizontal line for this reason.

Above I referred to activities, but just from a *descriptive* standpoint, distinguishing between those activities associated with the society’s *way of life* and those activities associated with the various *lifestyles* represented in the society—but without identifying *specific* activities.

But *describing* activities is not an end in itself. Also of interest is an understanding of *why* those activities occur, and two basic factors can be identified. On the one hand, the *beliefs* of an individual play a role as a cause of that person’s activities. Some of one’s beliefs may be true, some may *not* be; it is *never* the case, however, that all of the knowledge/technology present in the society is known by any given individual; and, unfortunately, much of what one *does* knows to be true is not! But whether one’s beliefs have, or lack, “truth value,” they are a factor in explaining one’s behavior.

The second factor that can be identified as a cause of behavior (ignoring here behaviors that have a strict biological basis) is “driving values.” (Note that the more general concept here is “mindset,” and I will be using that term frequently in the discussion that follows. Keep in mind that the figure was created with contemporary U. S. society in mind.) In the case on the United States a variety of conflicting such values are present, but the dominant driving values would seem to be (a) acquisitiveness, (b) aggressiveness, and (c) selfishness. That is, when we say that ours is a *materialistic* society, we mean that most adults in the society are “driven” to *acquire* as much money as they can, in part as an end in itself (strange, but true!), in part to enable them to acquire as much in the way of material goods as they can.

The motto here seems to be, “He who acquires the most before he dies wins” (again, strange, but true!). In being acquisitive, one is not necessarily a “hustler” in either a “swindler” or “con artist” sense (see the discussion in Part I), but one *does* tend to pursue the acquisition of money in an *aggressive* manner, and in doing so often behaves as if one is “possessed”—suggesting that

one is simply *unable* to perceive how one's activities have a negative impact on *others*. That fact may come back to haunt one in that someone who one has offended (or worse) by one's activities on one's upward climb may engage in activities to subvert the efforts of the "climber"—may, in fact, even "kill the bastard." But the climber, because of being virtually "possessed," tends to be oblivious of such a possibility

This matter of "possession"—being "wrapped up in oneself"—also carries with it the implication that the one "possessed" tends to lack empathy for others—to lack even the *capacity* for empathy. Because of this, it is totally unsurprising that the typical American is not very giving—to individuals in need, or to organizations that serve the needy. In addition, it would never occur to such a person to say to another person, "How wonderful (my) life is, 'cause you're in the world." Studies have indicated (e.g., [this](#), [this](#), and [this](#)) that found that the *higher* one's income, the *less* generous one tends to be (giving as a percent of one's income), and I find such a finding entirely believable. (Also, for a comparison of giving between "religious" people and non-religious people, see [this](#).)

Decision-making is, of course, involved with most of one's actions (we reserve the term "reaction" for those actions that do not involve conscious decision-making). But a question that arises is: To what degree—if any—are the decisions that "cause" one's activities the result of *choices*?—i.e., the result of "free will." Not being a philosopher, I feel no competence in providing an answer to that question. One perspective on the matter, however, is to assert what the portion of behavior that cannot be attributed to *determining* factors can be attributed, by default, to "free choice"! I don't claim that this is a *good* answer, only *an* answer.

As I noted at the beginning of Part II, my interest here in discussing societal components is not as an end in itself but, rather, to provide a basis for, first, offering some comments on the contents of each of the "boxes" and then, more importantly, thinking about societal development. Regarding the latter topic, given that societal development presumably involves changes in the contents of the "boxes" in the above figure, the figure perhaps provides a useful basis for *thinking* about the subject—and at a later point formulating hypotheses, and undertaking empirical research (or at least using the framework provided by the figure to analyze the research findings of others).

Let me next, then, briefly comment on the contents of these boxes from a here-and-now perspective.

Societal Components: A Static View

First, the figure shows that I have, with "Activities," identified two types—those associated with the way of life that differentiates one's society from other societies, and lifestyle categories

within one's society that help differentiate members of that society one from another. As I stated earlier, I think of *way of life* activities as those associated with the society's economy—and thus working hours (which for many is “9 to 5”)—and *lifestyle* activities as those activities that occur during leisure hours, excepting those activities (e.g., grocery shopping) that are common to all.

Much could be said regarding both of these types of activities, but I will limit myself here to a wish: I would like to see someone do a study of lifestyles in this country that has members of a sample respond to statements on a 7-point Likert scale, with those scores (those for a given person could be thought of as constituting a “[profile](#)”) then used in a grouping program to see what groups “fall out,” what characteristics the various groups have, and how many are in each. Without firm empirical findings of this sort to rely on, I hesitate to say any more about lifestyle groups.

As to why people engage in the *activities* they do, I have already mentioned beliefs and driving values. Two other factors need to be mentioned, however. First, the *physical setting* that one lives in will offer a variety of *opportunities*, but those opportunities vary from place to place; and even if one lives in an area with numerous opportunities, how many of them one takes advantage of will depend on one's income, interests, etc. Second, the *institutions* present in one's society can offer *opportunities* (e.g., churches, clubs), but can also place *limitations* on one's actions; for example, laws specify what one should not do (with penalties involved for being caught doing forbidden things) and thus act to restrain one's activities.

Second, why does one *have* one's particular *beliefs*? In part, the knowledge associated with one's society places limits on what one can know, but none of us can claim to possess but a small portion of the knowledge “out there.” However, much of what one believes is only partially true, or totally false—this, in large part, because of one's exposure to advertisements of various types, along the “news” programs, which are typically superficial in their coverage of events, and often simply fail to report important happenings (such as the number of civilians killed in drone attacks yesterday). In large part one's beliefs are acquired in the process of growing up, with little in the way of “choice” involved.

Third, why does one have the *values* that drive one's behavior? From a static perspective, the answer is that one absorbs certain values in the process of growing up—from one's parents, from watching television (programs as well as advertisements), perhaps from the church one attends, from one's reading, etc. The people in any society will vary in their value systems—perhaps especially if the country has experienced a great deal of in-migration (whether legal or not). But a given society tends to have a dominant value system that virtually everyone possesses to a degree, at least—and earlier I identified the values that dominate our society as acquisitiveness, aggressiveness, and selfishness. One tends to learn (especially at an unconscious level) early on

that these values are necessary for success in our society, and therefore acquires them without even thinking about the matter.

Fourth, the *knowledge/technology* possessed by a society is part “home grown,” in part borrowed from other societies. The degree to which a society *develops* knowledge/technology likely is a function of the driving values associated that society. If those values emphasize *maintenance* of the society as it is (i.e., if the society is a “traditional” one), once a “sufficient” amount of knowledge/technology has been developed, any further development depends on external events that impinge on the society, or ideas developed by some members of the society to improve existing technology; however, in such a society, the *development* of new ideas does not guarantee their *acceptance* by the society—immediately, at least.

In a society such as ours, however, where change and growth are valued, and acquisition and the other values named play an important role, there is a continual search for not only improving existing products (both consumer and producer), but developing new ones. Our value system creates—along with the phenomenon of “obsolescence” promoted by advertisers—a constant demand for the “new and improved,” and only when many are unemployed or under-employed does that demand diminish somewhat.

Finally, as to a society’s *setting*—both in terms of physical things and institutions—these were either created by members of the society or borrowed from other societies. In the case of physical things with fixed locations—e.g., buildings and roads—the things themselves are or were, of course, created by members of the society typically, but the ideas that enabled their construction might have been generated elsewhere, and then borrowed by the society in question.

As to *why* they are created, if the society is a growing one that is also changing over time, the growth itself will necessitate more and more building. And a *changing* society will tend to have more and more different *kinds* of things being created, with that development necessitating more and more structures from which they can be sold. That is, the very “dynamism” of the society makes it virtually inevitable that more and more structures and other physical things (e.g., roads) will be built, the structures “housing” more and more different *kinds* of things. Also, societal dynamism virtually requires institutional dynamism as well, although there tends to be a [lag](#) between physical developments and institutional developments—the latter being the laggards.

Societal Components: A Developmental Perspective

Early humans lived in nature and had lives involving direct interaction with nature, there being, however, differences in the lives of women and men. In both cases, though, one’s mind was anchored in the surround, both literally and imaginatively (as inventing and telling stories, these always involving the surround, was an important part of their lives—during leisure time). What

was in one person's mind was much like the contents of another's mind, with, however, age and sex (to a degree) differences being present to a degree. Change in such societies was not unknown, but was rare and usually slow.

The modern American lives in a *built* environment rather than a *natural* one, but not only does that environment (i.e., the built one) play little role in his/her thinking, the contents of *one* person's mind has little in common with those of *another's*. It's a wonder that one person is even able to communicate with another person, so varied are the contents of our minds! Despite this variety, we all—but to varying degrees—have in common tendencies to be acquisitive, aggressive, and selfish—because having such tendencies is virtually necessary for survival in our society. People vary in their personalities, of course, and some have acquired the above three “qualities” to a much lesser degree than the norm; but even those in our society who despise those “qualities” and strive to live by an opposing set of values find that our way of life requires that they have them to some degree.

The principal feature of our society is that the above-mentioned three “qualities” are dominant. This means that the various *other* characteristics of a modern society (illustrated in the figure, and . . .) all owe their existence to the dominant mindset. But how did this mindset *itself* develop?

The currently-dominant mindset has its origins in the Agricultural Revolution. As the human brain developed in terms of intelligence, it was perhaps inevitable that someone would “hit” on the idea, e.g., of *cultivating* grains, not just *harvesting* grains that grew naturally. There began, then, a very slow change in how humans acquired their food—from gathering, snaring, and hunting (those activities *themselves* involving technological developments, of course) to cultivation. And as more and more food was derived from cultivation, a nomadic sort of existence began to give way to an increasingly *sedentary* one.

As way of life was changing, so was the human mindset; and as changes were occurring in human mindset, they were doing so in a manner that “encouraged” technological developments, which became more and more common. A consequence of those developments was growth in the size of human groups, from small bands to increasingly large sedentary groups. And as [Kirkpatrick Sale](#) might argue, as human groups increased in numerical size, it became almost inevitable that social differentiation would occur, with class and caste systems emerging. *That* development had further implications for the development of the human mindset and increased differentiation in such. This is, of course, a huge topic that cannot be given adequate attention in an essay, but below I make a few comments on the matter.

It would seem, then, that technological development first caused a change in the human mindset, and that changes caused by that—such as a change to a sedentary existence and social

differentiation—themselves became causes of further changes in the human mindset. For example, as [Marshall McLuhan](#) has emphasized, as writing developed, and then printing, etc., those development further shaped the human mindset. A recent book by [Nicholas Carr](#) has even argued that the *internet* is affecting how our brains work!

Developments had occurred in England that enabled divergent mindsets to develop in that society prior to the beginning of the migration of some groups to the New World, and when immigrants starting coming here, they brought the particular mindset that they had with them. Sacvan [Bercovitch](#) has argued, in fact, that the mindset that developed in this country basically originated especially with the Puritans.

The ideas expressed by a *writer* can be another source of mindset change, and it would seem that [Adam Smith's](#) [1723 – 1790] *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) would be an excellent example of that. It would seem that the mindset that currently exists in the United States is a Puritan one, modified somewhat by ideas derived from Adam Smith—but, ironically, interpreted in a manner not [intended](#) by Smith! And the development of that mindset led to activities of which the current societal situation in this country is the result. Granted that I am offering a mono-causal explanation here, which type of explanation is by its very nature suspect. However, I believe that the mindset that developed early on in this country, and then developed someone over time, has played the key role in shaping our society. ([Frederick Jackson Turner](#) [1861 – 1932]—author of the “frontier thesis” might disagree with this view, but as a dead man is unable to criticize it!)

In closing, let me note that I basically wrote this essay “off the top of my head,” which fact is responsible for any deficiencies it has. I am not particularly happy with this essay as it stands, but my reactions to the Berman book cited earlier are what prompted this essay. At present, I cannot state why the perspective developed in this essay is relevant, but my unconscious mind “told me” that it does have relevance, and I suspect that at some point in the future its relevance will become clearer to me. Also, let me emphasize that the presentation here is of a tentative, preliminary nature, so that over time I will be modifying it—to the better, I hope! Given my concern with the fact of “global warming” and our necessity to develop, and then act on, adaptive measures, I especially hope that it will become clear to me how the discussion in this essay has relevance for *those* concerns.

[July 2, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/07/02/compete-with-or-ignore/>]

Sufyan informed me that this is essay 1100.

Compete With—or Ignore?

Alton C. Thompson

Joe Brewer—formerly with George [Lakoff](#)’s [Rockridge Institute](#), and now with [Cognitive Policy Works](#)—[argued recently](#) that liberals, in competing with conservatives in our society, consistently lose to them for a reason that few seem to recognize: “When two groups compete, the one with the most social cohesion wins in the long run”—and conservatives have such cohesion to a greater degree than do liberals.

What enables conservatives to cohere? What Brewer regards as the *superficial* answer to that question is the following:

In American politics, we see the top-down authoritarian worldview of Conservatives enabling them to fall in line and take marching orders. They form strong loyalty bonds through religious affiliation, old money networks, and various social clubs that give them an immense capacity for social cohesion.

The *fundamental* factor, however, Brewer argues, is the evolutionary phenomenon of “[group selection](#)”—a phenomenon accepted by some evolutionary biologists, rejected by others. Brewer’s source for the concept is the recently-published [The Social Conquest of Earth](#), by Edward O. Wilson (2012). Brewer lists four points that, in his mind, clarify the meaning of “group selection,” the fourth being:

The key strategy underlying this pattern is that well-organized groups, which elevate the needs of the whole over those of individuals, are more successful at acquiring resources and consolidating power than those individuals or groups that are less organized.

Brewer does not provide a very insightful overview of the concept of “group selection,” but that fact is not what I want to comment on here. I agree with Brewer *that* conservatives may cohere somewhat better than liberals, but would make three comments relative to Brewer’s presentation.

First, Brewer thinks of a conservative as being a person with certain values (of course!), those values being “rugged individualism, mass consumption, and a contempt for civil society . . .” I, in comparison, think of a conservative, rather, as one who is (a) acquisitive (i.e., materialistic—Brewer’s reference to “mass consumption”), (b) aggressive (which would seem to overlap with Brewer’s “individualistic”), and (c) selfish (which also so overlaps). Supposedly conservatives are believers in “small government” (Brewer’s “contempt for civil society”), but that alleged belief is not honored in a consistent way. If government expenditures benefit them (as do our massive—indeed utterly obscene!—expenditures on what is euphemistically called “defense”),

they are all for them—and they easily find “*reasons*” to support their advocacy. In doing so, however, they never mention crass factors such as how such programs help fill their pockets; they always use a “good for the country” sort of argument. However, their *selfishness* comes through in their opposition to help for those in need. Thus, their argument for “limited government” is a sham. It’s OK to help the rich, but not the poor: what a twisted morality!

In summary, then, Brewer’s concept of what a conservative is has some merit, but should have been stated in more detail. In addition, the word “individualistic” itself has positive connotations, but the “individualistic” nature of conservatives is anything but admirable. Use of “individualistic” rather than the more accurate *aggressive/selfish* is to hand conservatives some gold on a platter, and to concede the battle to conservatives without even combating them! Brewer should have been more aware of the terminology that he was using.

Second, I’m not at all convinced that bringing evolutionary biology into the discussion has much relevance—despite the fact that the title of his article is “The REAL Reason Conservatives Always Win.” After all, liberals are descended from the same ancestors as are conservatives (!); thus, it makes more sense to look to *proximate* causes rather than ones with roots in the distant past.

Let me offer a few possibilities:

- Historian Walter A. McDougall has [argued](#) (according to one reviewer) that “Americans have always been hustlers in both senses of the word—hard workers and scammers.” I’m not sure that “scammer” was a good choice of term, as a synonym for “scammer” is “swindler,” and it’s hard to believe that Americans have always been swindlers. I would like to think that McDougall argued that Americans have always been acquisitive, etc.—but not having read his book, this is just a guess.
- In the late 1890s historian [Frederick Jackson Turner](#) [1861 – 1932] presented his “frontier thesis,” and subsequently developed it. Turner argued that the experience of living on the frontier resulted in a “forging of the unique and rugged American identity” And that this experience “produced a new type of citizen—one with the power to tame the wild and one upon whom the wild had conferred strength and individuality.” “Over multiple generations, the frontier produced characteristics of informality, violence, crudeness, democracy and initiative that the world recognized as ‘American’”. It can be argued, then, that the *experience* of living on the frontier contributed to the development of conservatism in some of our ancestors, and especially its *individualistic* component and that the *ethos* that developed with pioneers got transmitted to their progeny, *their* progeny, etc.. (The individualism that developed on the frontier often got expressed in a “blame the victim” mentality: “You made your bed, now you get to sleep in it.”)

- [Adam Smith](#) [1723 – 1790] published his famous [Wealth of Nations](#) in 1776, and Charles Darwin [1809 – 1882] his famous [Origin of Species](#) in 1859. Both works were, in effect, proponents of both individualism and competition (and selfishness, implicitly), Smith arguing that both were *good* for promoting the general welfare, Darwin arguing that both were *natural*—with Darwin, at least, seeming to provide a scientific basis for his views. The views of Smith and Darwin differed primarily in that Smith’s perspective was *static*, Darwin’s was *developmental*. Both—but especially Darwin—laid the groundwork for the development of [Social Darwinism](#), a “philosophy” that provided a “scientific” basis for the argument that societies must be hierarchical, and that position in a society is a function of, and only of, “merit.” And if one gets is what one deserves, it follows that the poor are poor because they *deserve* to be, and it would therefore be inappropriate to provide them with any sort of assistance. This “philosophy” is, of course, one associated with conservatism—and not at all associated with liberalism.
- In my [“Why Our Society Has Become So Inegalitarian”](#) I identify as a key factor the *family* as an institution. That argument can be carried further here by pointing out that when one comes of age, in most cases one is “on one’s own,” and may receive little or no assistance from one’s parents. In being thrown out into “the world,” one must adapt to that world; and given that that “world” is governed by “conservative” values, one must adopt—or at least *pretend* to adopt—conservative values if one has any hope of gaining any degree of success. Morris Berman has [noted](#) (p. 161) the deeply ironic fact that alternative values have long been present in our society, such as in our religions, but these have been “basically marginal and exhortatory, and religious objections to the hustling life were easily converted into religious *approval* of the hustling life, ironically enough.”
- One learns values by observing one’s parents and others while growing up, and early on also “soaks in” values from one’s watching of television (both programs and commercials), associating with peers, reading, etc. But the media play a huge role in one’s value development, a fact noted by Brewer in his statement that the values of conservatism “are blasted at the American public through massive media outlets that they [i.e., conservatives] have acquired and built up over the last several decades.” Thus, on the one hand Brewer gives causal efficacy to “group selection,” but before doing that gives the media a huge role. This leads us to ask: Which of your two explanations do you wish us to accept, Mr. Brewer?

In summary, a variety of factors have “conspired” to make the development of a conservative value system “natural” in this country, and one needs to make no reference to evolutionary biology to explain this. Rather, this can be explained on the basis of:

- *Experiences* that one has in growing up, with one's parents' value system having perhaps been shaped by ancestors who had lived on the frontier.
- The fact that growing up itself involves "leaving the nest," and then being forced to acquire a conservative value system for the sake of "survival."
- Certain *intellectual developments* going back to the Puritans, and including especially works by Adam Smith and Charles Darwin.

Given the operation of factors such as these, the wonder is that *anyone* develops a liberal value system! I would attribute such development to the fact that there is liberal literature "out there"—including the Bible, rightly interpreted—and that when one reads such literature, and finds that it resonates with one, the reason for this is that one is "in tune" with his or her "human nature" as a human, and *senses* (or even *knows*) that s/he is living in a society with a way of life that is discordant with "human nature"—i.e., is "out of tune" with human nature. (See Chapters 2 – 4 on my [eBook](#).)

The bulk of Brewer's article is devoted to developing a strategy that will enable liberals to be able to compete better in their competition with conservatives. The question that I would ask of Brewer, however, is suggested in my title: **Rather than trying to *compete* with conservatives, wouldn't it be more rational to simply *ignore* them?** The basis for this question lies in the following facts:

- "Global warming"—what I like to call [TAD](#)—is occurring.
- We have either passed, or soon will, the "tipping point"—i.e., the point where the processes associated with TAD will begin to "snowball," to feed upon themselves.
- A point will be reached—likely within a few decades—when societies (including ours, of course) will begin to collapse.
- Before TAD has run its course, most of the world's population (90%, perhaps even more) will be "taken."

Although only the first point here is a fact—the rest being projections—those projections have a solid basis. And what they suggest is that rather than wasting one's time determining how best to compete with conservatives, it makes more sense to think about how one will *adapt* to the changes that will inevitably be occurring. If one is a fool, one will look to government for one's "salvation." But if one has some degree of intelligence, one will realize that as the society collapses, unless one is then living a self-sufficient way of life, one is likely to perish. One can do so either as a homesteader or as a member of a small cooperative community, and can make a

choice based on one's personality, etc. The point, however, is to *make* a choice—and ASAP. If people such as Brewer want, rather, to “fiddle while Rome burns,” I say: Let them!

[July 3, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/07/03/is-theater-enough/>]

Is Theater Enough?

Alton C. Thompson

People in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) were recently (June 20, 2012) treated to an unusual sight, an inflatable globe being pushed down the street ([source](#) of picture). The occasion: The People's



Summit for Social and Environmental Justice in Defense of the Commons, a summit that occurred concurrently with the United Nations [Conference](#) on Sustainable Development (also referred to as “Rio +20”).

The pushing of an inflatable globe was just one part of the “Global March” that occurred in Rio. In [addition](#), “Feather headdresses floated past

dreadlocks[,] and activists in cow costumes mingled with others in business suits Thursday as more than 200 non-governmental groups joined in a People's Summit to seek alternative responses to the planet's environmental degradation.”

“The alternative event, funded by the Brazilian government, drew about 15,000 people a day, according to organizers. It focused the frustration of indigenous groups, environmental activists, unions, land rights groups and others over the alleged timidity of proposals coming out of the official convention, and over international failure to act on commitments made 20 years ago at the first Earth Summit.” (So far as indigenous peoples are concerned, the Indigenous Peoples’ International Centre for Policy Research and Education has published numerous relevant studies, including “Rio+20: The Essential Information,” available at [this site.](#))

It is notable that the People’s Summit was not a “grassroots” event but, rather, was one sponsored by the Brazilian government. Should we be surprised, then, in learning (from Adam [Parsons](#)) that:

Almost a week since the Rio+20 Earth Summit ended, civil society is coming to terms with the ‘epic failure’ of global leaders to agree [on] meaningful action for

addressing the worsening planetary and social crises. Campaigners were near unanimous in [decrying the inertia and lack of urgency](#) shown by governments for tackling issues related to sustainable development, with national self-interest overriding any possibility of dealing with global problems in a genuinely cooperative and global manner.

That is, given that Rio +20 involved numerous *governmental* leaders, why would one *expect* that those attending would arrive at any agreement for “meaningful action”? And given that the so-called “People’s Summit” was *itself* sponsored by a government (!), why would one expect *it* to arrive at any meaningful conclusions? (In an email that I just received from Adam Parsons, I learned that “I’m not actually sure there was an outcome document as such, to be honest. There was [,however,] a preparatory document made, which is excellent: [Another Future is Possible](#) By Thematic Social Forum [Rio Peoples Summit].”)

Perhaps I am overly cynical in my attitude toward government. My excuse is that I live in the United States, where the lack of democracy is *guaranteed* by our Constitution, and our right to vote has been greatly diminished in value as a result of the [Citizens United](#) decision of the Supreme Court—a decision that permits corporations to spend unlimited amounts on elections. “Corporations are people, you know, and therefore have the same freedom-of-speech rights as other people.” (What planet are these justices from anyway? And why on earth are they given the right to call themselves “justices”?!)

Participating in meetings and parades is fun, I suppose (except for those activists who had participated, and have since been [killed](#)), but is it anything other than *theater*? That is, does it actually *accomplish* anything? And cannot one say the same regarding Rio +20 itself?

On *Links: International Journal of Socialist Renewal* Pablo Solon—executive director of [Focus on the Global South](#), and chief negotiator for climate change and United Nations ambassador of the Plurinational State of Bolivia from 2009 to June 2011—[writing](#) about a month before the Rio meeting stated: “Twenty years after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, the environmental crisis continues to worsen.” *That* suggests that the 1992 meeting was mere theater, and—based on past experience—one should expect the same of the 2012 meeting, should one not?

The [BBC](#) (British Broadcasting Corporation) had this to say near the end of the 2012 conference:

The UN conference on sustainable development is coming to a close in Rio, Brazil, amid widespread criticism that little has been achieved.

Twenty years after the iconic Earth Summit in the same city, the meeting was meant to chart a new path for sustainable development to raise people out of poverty and protect the natural world.

But it has been branded insipid, disappointing, and a failure of leadership . . .

But based on past experience—and the fact that the conference involved *governments*—why would *not* expect to be disappointed by the outcome of the conference?

Even *critics* of the conference have had little of value to say regarding Rio +20. For example, Pablo Solon wrote that “governments should recognise, respect and make sure that the rules of nature prevail.” Of course governments *should* “make sure that the rules of nature prevail”—but *will* they (a rhetorical question, of course!)? One can easily agree with Colon that:

Instead of applying the market rules to nature what we need is to forge a new system based on the principles of:

- peace, harmony and balance among all and with all things;
- complementarity, solidarity, equality and social and environmental justice;
- collective wellbeing and the satisfaction of the basic necessities of all;
- recognition of human beings for what they are, not what they own;
- elimination of all forms of colonialism, imperialism and interventionism.

Also, Colon was “right on” in criticizing Rio +20 for “promoting new market mechanisms for the commodification and financialisation of nature, life and ecosystem services under the mirage of a ‘Green Economy.’” And although Colon recognizes the “looming danger of an at least 4° C increase in temperature, which will threaten life as we know it” he does not seem to comprehend (a) the *reality* of this danger and/or (b) the *implications* associated with such a rise in temperature.

For were such a rise to occur (which increasingly seems likely!), this would not only mean a rise in the global mean temperature *per se*. It would also mean that with an increased amount of heat energy trapped in the lower atmosphere, there would be an increase in the *number* of storms (and therefore a rise in sea level, and more flooding), an increase in their *severity* (with consequent increase in lives lost and property damage), and increased *variability* in atmospheric conditions—so that drought would become increasingly a problem (with fires resulting from the dryness—as has been occurring recently in the state of Colorado).

One might think that because of the very real possibility of a 4° C rise in the global mean, Colon would recognize that looking to governments—or the United Nations—for “salvation” would be not only foolish, but insane. Indeed, Colon *claims* to believe that “The collective global response that is needed to confront the crisis we face requires structural changes. We must change the capitalist system, not the Earth's system.”

Why, then, does he make statements such as these?:

- “Developed countries must change their unsustainable patterns of production and consumption through public policies, regulations, as well as conscious and active participation of society, particularly the marginalised sections, to address the grave inequities and inequalities in resource use and access within societies and between nations.”
- “States must guarantee the human right to water, education, health, communication, transportation, energy and sanitation. The provision of these services should be essentially public and based on efficient social management, not private business.”

How do such actions constitute the *structural* change that he claims is necessary? Whereas Colon *states* that developed “countries must change their unsustainable patterns of production and consumption through public policies,” I would say, rather, that they *will*. Not, however, because they *choose* so to do, however, but because “global warming” will *force* change upon them—in the form of societal collapse.

Colon, however, doesn’t appear to foresee such an eventuality, which is why he can blather on about what developed countries *should* be doing. But what if he is *wrong*? What if the various phenomena associated with “global warming” become so intense that (a) millions begin to die, (b) societies begin to collapse, and (c) their collapse causes millions *more* to die? Colon may not see such events as possibly (*probably*, in fact!) on the horizon—but *I* do. And *because* I do, I believe it necessary for individuals to “take matters into their own hands” and begin preparing for the worst. What this would involve is *not* looking to government for “salvation” but, rather, *beginning* adaptation plans, and then *acting* on them—ASAP.

I suspect, however, that many in our midst will continue to engage in *theatrical* events—events that may provide them with some psychological satisfaction, but will contribute nothing to the survival of themselves or their descendants. One gains no sense of satisfaction from thinking about that possibility, of course, and must simply “push on”—*oneself* engaging in adaptive activities, and encouraging others to do the same.

[July 5, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/07/05/pdf-can-we-learn-from-scrooge/>]

Can We Learn From Scrooge?

Alton C. Thompson

John D. Cusumano (“who runs a private practice mental health office specializing in psychospiritual growth”) provides a positive answer to this question. Both the title of his book—*Transforming Scrooge: Dickens’[s] Blueprint for a Spiritual Awakening* (1996)—and his Chapter 8—“Dickens’[s] Plan for a Twenty-First Century Awakening”—*suggest* this. And the *contents* of his book argue the point. (I should note that *A Christmas Carol* itself constitutes Part Two of the book, pp. i and ii, and pp. 1 – 121.) (For information about Charles Dickens, 1812 – 1870, see, e.g., [this](#). For information about *A Christmas Carol*, see, e.g., [this](#).)

I purchased and read Cusumano’s book ten years ago, and it has been sitting on the shelf ever since. Today (Saturday, June 30, 2012), however, “a little bird” told me that I should pick up the book and read some of it—and I did so. As usually happens when one looks at a book at a point in time long after one first read it, one learns new things, and has new reactions (assuming, that is, that one can even remember one’s initial reactions! What helps me with this is that I am always writing comments in the margins of my books, and sometimes even date my comments.)

I’m sure that virtually every reader knows who Scrooge is (not *was*—for, in being a fictional character, he will never die!), and knows that at the beginning of the story, Scrooge was anything but an admirable person (pp. 2, 3 in Part II):

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice.

Scrooge had experiences—while sleeping!—that transformed him, however, so that (p. 120 in Part II):

He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.

What, according to Dr. Cusumano, is Dickens telling us in this book? (p. 154 in Part I)

Dickens is telling us that we should stop punishing ourselves and learn to take care of or personal needs. We need to take the time to enjoy the company of others. We must

learn to find quiet time just for us. We must work to drop our addictive behaviors. We need to exercise and/or take part in physical activities. We need to fill our personal environments with a variety of things that nurture the development of our souls and bring beauty into our lives. We need to eat healthy, quality foods. We need to laugh. In short, we need to treat ourselves well, just as we need to treat others well.

In putting some “flesh” here on the [Golden Rule](#) Dr. Cusumano has done us an undeniable service. Certainly this is good advice—advice that all of us should try to follow. But is this *really* the message that Dickens was trying to convey in *A Christmas Carol*? And if *not*, why, then, did Cusumano spend so much time in the book *describing* the process of personal transformation, and the *difficulties* associated with that process? Dr. Cusumano’s conclusion here seems rather strange to me given the “thrust” of his book.

It is clear that Cusumano had, prior to writing the book, been strongly influenced by the ideas of therapist John Bradshaw (of “wounded inner child” fame) and other therapists and psychologists, for his Bibliography/Suggested Reading List (pp. 161 – 163, following Part II), with a few exceptions (e.g., Carl Sagan and Edmund Wilson) primarily lists works by such people. The “wounded inner child” concept clearly plays a role in Cusumano’s presentation, for he attributes Scrooge’s *current* malfunctioning to Scrooge’s miserable childhood—and seemingly *only* that.

There *is* biographical information regarding *Dickens*’s childhood (discussed by Cusumano) that provides a basis for such an argument; however, I am reminded here of the principle that if one’s only tool is a hammer, one tends to see nails where there *aren’t* any along with where there are. That is, given that Cusumano’s *training* (I assume) is in therapy, and he is a *practicing* therapist, it is not surprising that his orientation would be *individualistic* rather than *societal*.

(I should note, though, that Cusumano says regarding Scrooge that Scrooge (p. 47, Part I) “realized that the attainment of true individualism always leads one to a sense of bondedness and community.” I assume that this is also *Cusumano*’s concept of “individualism,” and indicates that individualism *can* mean something different than it usually does; it *can* mean that individuals tend to develop their abilities *in* and *for* service to others (rather than for self-advancement)—which, for me, is what it *should* mean.)

I find some of Cusumano’s therapeutic and “New Age” terminology (e.g., in Chapters 4 and 5 he discusses “chakras”) unappealing—and not even *necessary* in understanding Scrooge. I have already quoted Cusumano’s discussion of needs, but myself see as a fundamental need—especially for the purposes of discussing Scrooge—the need to be well thought of by others. [1] Those who are motivated by this “natural” need will interact with others in a friendly way; will bring (usually without even trying!) humor into their conversations with others; will not respond in kind when others insult them or otherwise engage in hurtful actions toward them; will have

enough empathy for others that they will know when others are hurting, physically or emotionally, and will respond sensitively to that hurt; etc.

I perceive Scrooge as a person (albeit fictional!) who had this need, but because of early experiences suppressed it. This suppression did not occur as a result of conscious choice but, rather, occurred because his “system” acted so to do as a coping mechanism—i.e., to protect Scrooge. The experiences that Scrooge was “given” while asleep—“seeing” his past, present, and future, under the guidance of a Spirit—had the purpose of helping Scrooge “uncover” what he had suppressed long ago—and they worked. What those experiences did for Scrooge was to enable him to see how *others* perceived him at different stages of his life, and in seeing that he was not thought well of by most, it “dawned” on him that he had been “missing the boat”: in how he related to others. He came to recognize that not only did his behavior do little to help *others* (to make an understatement!), it didn’t even contribute to his *own* well-being. His past experiences had so blinded him that, in effect, he couldn’t see what was right before his eyes.

Once Scrooge *could* see clearly, he realized that it *was* in his power to change his life for the better—and he *did* so. But what relevance—if any—does this story have for us moderns?

Dickens evidently believed that childhood experiences played the dominant role in affecting adult behavior, so that if one were greedy, selfish, etc., this was because—and *only* because—one had had a miserable childhood—i.e., had suffered privation, even abuse. I accept this view to a point, but would argue that the modern youth—regardless of the events of his/her younger years—finds, in coming of age, that s/he must enter the world, and somehow make a living in that world. There are, of course, exceptions—people such as “Mitt” Rhombney, who are born with “silver spoons in their mouths,” and, in coming of age, don’t face the sort of situation that those of us in the “99%” face. But my reference here is just to us ordinary folk.

We ordinary folk find that there is a necessity to find some sort of job (usually after a certain period of education/training), and find that we must pursue a job *aggressively* if we are to get one. We also find that once we “land” a job, we need to conform to certain guidelines, but also be discreetly aggressive if we have any hope of “climbing the ladder.” That is, we need to make the right connections in the firm for which we work, and pretend to be agreeable to those in the firm who might help in our advancement.

Outside of work we find that there is pressure to “keep up with the Joneses.” That is, we are expected to use the income that our job provides to purchase a “nice” home in a “nice” neighborhood, to purchase as expensive an automobile as we can afford (more than one if one’s wife also works—which is common), to attend and give parties for co-workers (especially ones on a higher “rung” than oneself), and purchase “the latest and greatest” things for one’s self and one’s family.

Thus, even if, in principle, one is not a materialistic person, the society that one lives in virtually forces one to engage in behaviors such as those mentioned above. That is, much of the objectionable behavior in our society can be attributed not so much to upbringing problems as *current situation*—the nature of the *society* that one happens to be a member of. *Societal* pressures to maintain a “high” standard of living virtually force one to be *selfish*; note, however, that one tends to be selfish *by default*, not because one *chooses* so to be.[2] That is, because of societal pressures, one in effect becomes so “possessed” with “getting ahead” and maintaining a “high” standard of living that one “blanks out” of one’s mind the thought of giving to charities or volunteering—and has little time, energy, and money anyway to engage in those activities.

One’s “selfishness,” then, is not a *character* defect but, rather, is a *reflection* of the society one lives in. This is a point totally missing in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*.

Is there any hope that one can live in the society as it currently exists and yet become an “after” Scrooge? In principle, yes. If one achieves a position in the society that gives one some degree of *security*, one can abandon “the rat race”—“thumb one’s nose” at it. The problem is: What experiences would one need to have to convince one to do this? And I admit that I am at a loss for an answer. Perhaps reading the right books could do it. Perhaps attending the right church could do it. Perhaps watching *A Christmas Carol*—either as a play or movie—could do it. Perhaps watching other “conversion” movies—such as [Groundhog Day](#) or [Chocolat](#) (two of my favorite movies!)—could help.

However, so much of what is published—and read—in our society is junk. Attending church services—especially in a megachurch—may *reinforce* one’s behavioral tendencies rather than help change them. And most movies are created to make money not to convert people—and so help reinforce, and even intensify, the viewer’s mindset. Thus, although some of us are able to escape the tentacles of our society, I have no expectation whatsoever that many will.

This “truism” not only has implications for “reforming” our society, but for the very continued survival of our species. For the way of life we *find* ourselves in (for we didn’t *choose* it, but were *born* into it in most cases, and help *perpetuate* it—but not as a matter of choice) is a “high energy” one that results in the transfer of carbon from below the earth’s surface to the lower atmosphere. It accumulates there, thereby intensifying the “greenhouse effect.” Were there no “greenhouse effect,” we would not be able to live; but by *intensifying* that effect, we are causing more and more “global warming”—i.e., a series of atmospheric phenomena that, if they don’t “do us in” as a species, seem likely to reduce the world’s population to but a fraction of what it is currently—and possibly do so within the next 50 years.

Given this very strong possibility it would seem that there is a “silver lining” in this “cloud”: If we simply sit back and let “global warming” take its course, many, if not most, of us will perish;

if, however, some of us recognize the threat that “global warming” poses, and then act to adapt to the changes that will inevitably be occurring, and encourage/help others to do the same, some of us at least may survive. We will be able to build a New Society while the Existing Order disintegrates, and in doing so have an opportunity to create a sort of society within which the “pre”-Scrooge sort of person will be *unable* to arise. Rather, we will have a society of “post”-Scrooge type people—and will have finally achieved the dream that many have had over the centuries.

It is unfortunate that the prospect of impending disaster appears to be the only thing that can give us hope at present, but . . . *c’est la vie*.

Endnotes

1. [Thorstein Veblen](#) [1857 – 1929] recognized such a need: “Man as we find him to-day has much regard to his good fame—to his standing in the esteem of his fellow-men. This characteristic he always has had, and no doubt always will have.” Stated (p. 392) in “Some Neglected Points in the Theory of Socialism,” In (pp. 387 – 408) [The Place of Science in Modern Civilisation and Other Essays](#). New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918. This article originally appeared in the *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. II, 1892.
2. This view of selfishness “popped in my head” shortly after completing the first draft of this essay. What this illustrates is that one is often motivated to write not so much to convey information to others, but because one recognizes that if one forces oneself to put one’s thoughts into words, one’s unconscious mind then begins analyzing what one has just written—and may give one a new perspective. Before writing this essay it had never occurred to me to think of selfishness as a “default” phenomenon; thus, I learned something important by writing this essay. One might, I suppose, think that “religious” people have a greater tendency to “fight” the societal pressure of maintain a “high” standard of living, but are perhaps even *less* prone to fight it than others!

[July 6, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/07/06/another-resistance-path/>]

Another Resistance Path

Alton C. Thompson

Chris Hedges, in his [current column](#), reminds us of shame associated with our nation's beginnings:

Native Americans' resistance to the westward expansion of Europeans took two forms. One was violence. The other was accommodation. Neither worked. Their land was stolen, their communities were decimated, their women and children were gunned down and the environment was ravaged.

This past is painful to contemplate—but it happened. My own ancestors—thank God!—were not involved in the rapacious actions directed at the indigenous peoples who had occupied this land prior to the coming of the white man, thus I have no reason to feel any sense of responsibility for those heinous actions. However, my ancestors *benefitted* from those actions—and so have I. Therefore, I *cannot* escape responsibility for those actions—and use this essay to indicate how I might respond to it.

Given how Hedges opened his essay, I assumed that its theme would be how we modern Americans can *atone* for the evil perpetrated against the indigenous peoples who had occupied this land before Europeans began to arrive. And this expectation was reinforced by the fact of my knowledge that Chris had a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard University. Instead, however, he continued by saying:

And as we face similar forces of predatory, unchecked corporate power intent on ruthless exploitation and stripping us of legal and physical protection, we must confront how we will respond.

The reason, then, that Hedges began his column by referring to past European treatment of the indigenous peoples is that although some of the latter chose the path of accommodation (but were betrayed), others chose the path of resistance—of *violent* resistance, in fact. Hedges perceives a parallel between the indigenous peoples of the past and us members of the “99% today”—i.e., just as the indigenous peoples faced predatory power, so do we members of the “99%” today—and advocates that we moderns also engage in resistance.

Personally, I think that it is *obscene* to compare our modern situation with that faced in the past by our indigenous brothers—and I am somewhat surprised that Hedges, given his theological training, would not also find such a comparison obscene. After all, although we modern

members of the “99%” have been exploited by “unchecked corporate power,” we have not been subject to mass slaughter. I will grant that there is *some* basis for comparing our situation today with that faced by indigenous peoples in the past, but would argue that there is not *enough* of a basis to make a valid comparison.

Hedges is, however, correct in “holding up” [Crazy Horse](#) (an Oglala Lakota) as a true American hero. Quoting from Ian Frazier’s [Great Plains](#) (2001), he says:

He [Crazy Horse] led, long after he knew that ultimate defeat was inevitable, the most effective revolt on the plains, wiping out [Gen. George] [Custer](#) and his men on the [Little Big Horn](#). “Even the most basic outline of his life shows how great he was,” Ian Frazier writes in his book “**Great Plains**,” “because he remained himself from the moment of his birth to the moment he died; because he knew exactly where he wanted to live, and never left; because he may have surrendered, but he was never defeated in battle; because, although he was killed, even the Army admitted he was never captured; because he was so free that he didn’t know what a jail looked like.” His “dislike of the oncoming civilization was prophetic,” Frazier writes. “He never met the President” and “never rode on a train, slept in a boarding house, ate at a table.” And “unlike many people all over the world, when he met white men he was not diminished by the encounter.”

What an admirable man! And what was his fate?

Crazy Horse was bayoneted to death on Sept. 5, 1877, after being tricked into walking toward the jail at Fort Robinson in Nebraska. The moment he understood the trap he pulled out a knife and fought back.

Crazy Horse resisted the white interlopers in the only way that was *meaningful* at the time. Accommodation didn’t work, and neither did violent resistance. But at least violent resistance permitted him to remain a *man* and not a mere *mouse*. As William Shakespeare has [Polonius](#) say to his son Laertes (in *Hamlet*):

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Should we moderns take the same course that Crazy Horse did? Is our situation so *desperate* that that’s our *only* choice? Here is Hedges’s “answer”:

And while I do not advocate violence, indeed will seek every way to avoid it, I have no intention of accommodating corporate power whether it hides behind the mask of Barack Obama or Mitt Romney. At the same time, I have to acknowledge that resistance may ultimately be in vain. Yet to resist is to say something about us as human beings. It keeps alive the possibility of hope, even as all empirical evidence

points to inevitable destruction. It makes victory, however remote, possible. And it makes life a little more difficult for the ruling class, which satisfies the very human emotion of vengeance.

What Hedges seems to suggest, then, is peaceful resistance of some sort—without, however, specifying the *form* that it should take. He admits, in fact, that (peaceful) “resistance may ultimately be in vain.”

Why, then, bother to even *suggest* the strategy? Is it the only option we have?—except for engaging in violence, a path likely to be equally fruitless.

More to the point, given Hedges’s discussion of an American hero: Would *Crazy Horse*, were he alive today, approve of the resistance strategy advocated by Chris Hedges? I think not! I would like to think that Crazy Horse accepted the “kill two birds with one stone” principle—i.e., the principle that if a given path will allow one to attain two objectives *simultaneously*, it makes sense to follow that path.

If *one* objective today is to somehow combat—but peacefully—corporate power, what would be the *second* objective? My answer: “Saving” ourselves—insofar as that’s possible—from the ravages likely to occur as the result of the various atmospheric phenomena associated with “global warming.” It should be obvious that if we try to accomplish this objective by working to convince the *government* to save us, we will be “spinning our wheels”: Not only will we not have any success; *if* we do, we still will not have removed ourselves from the tentacles of corporate power.

The “obvious” answer—one that will enable us to “kill two birds with one stone”—is that of starting to create a New Society within the shell of the Existing Order. Given that (a) “global warming” is likely to cull many people, (b) that at some point our society will collapse in consequence, and (c) that that collapse will result in even more deaths, it follows that the units of that New Society should be designed to be as self-sufficient as possible—and located where they will be safest from the effects of “global warming,” as well as desperate people looking for food once the process of societal collapse begins.

Engaging in such an effort would simultaneously *remove* one from the exploitation perpetrated by the corporate elite and *prepare* one—insofar as preparation *can* be accomplished—for living in the “global warming” world.

There is always the chance that the corporate elite (or its lackeys) would “catch wind” of such a movement, and try to stop it—just as the religious leaders in Jesus’s time may have “caught wind” of Jesus’s use of bread and wine as substitute sacrifices, recognized such a practice—if adopted widely—posed a threat to their very existence, and therefore got rid of the troublemaker.

However, we modern members of the “99%” have *legal protections* that Crazy Horse did not have, meaning that there is some hope that a New Society Movement *could* be successful. It is unlikely that we would be massacred by the corporate elite’s lackeys; after all, members of the elite are “civilized” people, and therefore would never dream of massacring us. (Whoops! I almost forgot. They *have* been involved in massacring innocents in *other* countries, so perhaps they wouldn’t mind massacring *us* as well! Oh, well. Let’s take our chances!)

There are, of course, no guarantees that such a Movement would be successful—for we cannot know in advance how serious the effects of “global warming” will be, and neither can we predict how the corporate elite would react to such a Movement—but *those* facts should not deter us from at least *trying* to “save” ourselves.

A point that I would emphasize is that even though the calamity predicted by some climate scientists as a result of “global warming” does *not* occur (unlikely!), the creation of a New Society within this prison that we inhabit would potentially grow to a point that the corporate elite—dependent as it is on those of us in the “99%”—would be faced with two choices: Join with us or die! In effect, I argued this in an [article published in 1984](#) (!), and I still believe it.

[July 8, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/07/08/the-people-have-spoken/>]

The People Have Spoken

Alton C. Thompson

The Peoples' Summit for Social and Environmental Justice (in defense of the commons, against the commodification of life)—which ran concurrently with Rio+20—ended a little over a week ago (on June 22, 2012), and a [Final Declaration](#) has now been published on the Share the World's Resources (STWR) web site. A link to this was kindly supplied to me by Adam Parsons, an editor at STWR.

The original Declaration was published in Portuguese, and what's available on the STWR site is a "Google" translation into English. The latter fact is unfortunate, because many statements in the translation are so garbled as to be virtually incomprehensible. Nonetheless, one can perceive the "gist" of the statement as one reads it.

The Report notes that there has been a "corporate capture" of the United Nations and most (national) governments, the result being that these units "have demonstrated irresponsibility with the future of humanity and the planet" Indeed, corporate interests even dominated "the official conference"—and it was that fact that necessitated the Peoples' Summit, also held in Brazil's Rio de Janeiro. As one might expect from the fact of "corporate capture," the official conference arrived at "solutions" that had been—and were—"advocated by the same actors who caused the global crisis." That is, it arrived at "solutions" that weren't solutions at all.

As an example, the promotion, by the official conference, of a "green economy" simply reflects contemporary capitalism in that it "makes use of old and new mechanisms, such as deepening of the public-private debt, the super-stimulus to consumption, ownership and concentration of new technologies, carbon markets and biodiversity, land grabbing and land foreignization and public-private partnerships, among others." Capitalism, then, is the enemy, especially now when the world economy is dominated by *transnational* firms which "continue to commit their crimes with the systematic violation of the rights of people and nature with impunity . . . [and] advance their interests through militarization, criminalization of livelihoods of people and social movements promoting deterritorialization in the field and in the city."

What the *Peoples'* Summit was about—in contrast to the *official* conference—was "building alternatives," developing "new paradigms of society," recognizing the "the true structural cause of the global crisis, the capitalist system of patriarchal, racist and homophobic," recognizing that the "alternatives are in our people, our history, our customs, knowledge, practices and production systems, we must maintain, upgrade and achieve scale project as counter-hegemonic and

transformative.” In addition, “The convergence of social transformation requires action, joints, and schedules from the resistance against hegemonic and alternative to the capitalist system that are underway in every corner of the planet.” (whatever *that* means!)

The document identifies a number of “axes of struggle”:

- Against the militarization of states and territories;
- Against the criminalization of social movements and organizations;
- Violence against women;
- Violence against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgender people;
- Against large corporations;
- Against the imposition of unjust economic payment of debts and popular of these audits;
- To guarantee the right of peoples to land and territory urban and rural;
- For consultation and free, prior and informed consent, based on the principles of good faith and binding, according to [ILO Convention 169](#); [ILO is for International Labour Organization]
- For the healthy food and food sovereignty, against pesticides and GMOs;
- For the guarantee of rights and conquest;
- For solidarity with the peoples and countries, especially those threatened by military coups or institutional, as is happening now in Paraguay;
- The sovereignty of the people in control of the commons against the attempts of commodification;
- By changing the matrix and current energy model;
- For the democratization of the media;
- In recognition of the historical social and ecological debt;
- For the construction of the WORLD DAY OF GENERAL STRIKE.

Note, however, that this list—the whole document, for that matter—is more of a “wish list” than anything else. It identifies no *specific* courses of action to be taken, being content, rather, with making vague generalities. It identifies *kinds* of goals to work toward (e.g., “democratization of the media”), but presents no *specific* plans of action; nor does it specify *who* (in terms of types of units—public and/or private) is to carry forward any plans, once developed. If the *official*

conference had the problem of being dominated by *corporate* thinking, this *unofficial* one had the problem of being excessively *amorphous* in its goals and conclusions.

The Peoples' Summit was clearly *anti-capitalist* in tone—and specifically anti domination by large multinational corporations—and seemed to suggest that an alternative to the Existing Order was clearly needed. However, members of that Summit seemed to lack a clear “picture” of a desirable Alternate Order, as well as any clear ideas regarding how to *usher in* an Alternate Order. Likely the face-to-face meetings that occurred during the course of the Summit resulted in the generation of some important ideas; but if that was the case, one gains no sense of what they might be in reading the Declaration. Yes, the “people have spoken”—as my title suggests; they have done so in a *muffled* voice, however (in the Declaration, at least).

Not only am I bothered by the lack of *substance* in the Declaration; the Declaration gives me the impression that the attendees at the Peoples' Summit were so occupied with problems of an *immediate* and *near-future* nature that most of them could not see the “big picture.” Perhaps, also, few of them have done much reading in the climate literature, so that they are not as aware as they should be of the very real threat posed by “global warming”—i.e., that complex of atmospheric phenomena that includes a trend in an increase in the global mean temperature, but many other phenomena as well.

The report states that “the vitality and strength of demonstrations and discussions at the Summit of the Peoples strengthened our conviction that only the people organized and mobilized can rid the world of corporate control and financial capital.” Which statement indicates that those who wrote the report are not aware of the possibility—perhaps even probability!—that “global warming” will begin to accelerate, so that within a few decades “corporate control” itself will be “history”—because societies *themselves* will be collapsing. Thus, although the report refers to the “future of humanity and the planet,” the basic *thrust* of the report does not reflect such an orientation.

Once one adopts a longer-run point of view, one will realize that the *real* problem that confronts us not the one at hand but, rather, the one that lies on the *near horizon*. Once one comes to realize *this*, one will start to shift one's thinking from addressing *current* problems to thinking about the actions that will need to be engaged in to *adapt* to the changes that will be occurring “down the road.”

Perhaps some of those who attended the Peoples' Summit were thinking along these lines, and made an effort to convince their fellow attendees of a need to change their mental orientation. If this was the case, however, the Declaration gives no indication that this occurred.

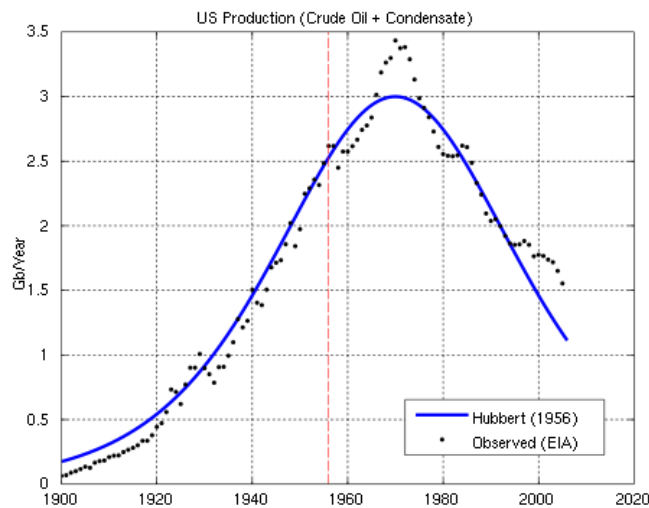
Did the Summit *accomplish* anything—except for giving people an opportunity to interact with like-minded others? Personally, I must answer that question in the negative.

[July 9, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/07/09/the-bad-news-about-oil/>]

The Bad News About Oil

Alton C. Thompson

The late M. King [Hubbert](#) (1903 – 1989) was most known for his “discovery” of the “Hubbert’s Curve,” an example of which is given below:



What Hubbert “discovered” is that if any particular oil-producing area is studied, it will be found that production tends to follow a “normal” curve. That is, once production begins, the rate of production begins to increase, but at a certain point (“Hubbert’s peak”) the rate will begin to decrease until a point is reached where production actually begins to fall. As the [figure](#) to the left indicates for the 48 contiguous states of the United States, oil production increased until about 1970, and has since been on the decrease. A roughly

similar pattern has been found for other parts of the world, lending credence to Hubbert’s “theory.”

Until recently, Hubbert’s theory has “worked.” However, what has come to light recently is that the fundamental assumption used by Hubbert is flawed—the assumption that the supply of oil is finite. On the face of it, that assumption seems to make sense: We live on a finite earth, thus it’s “obviously” the case that any given mineral or other inanimate “resource” is also in finite supply. The problem with Hubbert’s assumption, however, is that it was based on the assumption of certain technology being available to extract oil, it being presumed that that technology would not change significantly. Recent technological developments (some would call them “advances”) have, however, enabled the extraction of oil from locations where extraction was not possible before; and increases in the price of gasoline at the pump have made profitable the extraction of oil from locations that previously had prohibitively high extraction costs.

As a consequence, “Hubbert’s peak” for the entire world has become increasingly difficult to pinpoint. As George Monbiot stated recently in [The Guardian](#):

In 1975 MK Hubbert, a geoscientist working for Shell who had correctly predicted the decline in US oil production, suggested that global supplies could peak in 1995. In 1997 the petroleum geologist Colin Campbell estimated that it would happen before 2010. In 2003 the geophysicist Kenneth Deffeyes said he was "99% confident" that peak oil would occur in 2004. In 2004, the Texas tycoon T. Boone Pickens predicted that "never again will we pump more than 82m barrels" per day of liquid fuels. (Average daily supply in May 2012 was 91m.) In 2005 the investment banker Matthew Simmons maintained that ["Saudi Arabia ... cannot materially grow its oil production"](#). (Since then its output has risen from 9m barrels a day to 10m, and it has another 1.5m in spare capacity.)

Peak oil hasn't happened, and it's unlikely to happen for a very long time.

For those in the *energy business*, this is good news—for it potentially means a high level of profits for decades to come. For the *rest of us*, however, the news is anything but good. Indeed, even for those *in* the energy business this is not good news—for the simple fact that they occupy the same earth as the rest of us: Our fate will be theirs as well.

Back when Hubbert predicted that the peak of production would occur before the beginning of the twenty-first century, some environmentalists were comforted by that “fact” because they believed that as supplies diminished, causing an increase in prices, we humans—because of a growing population combined with a desire for most to achieve the highest standard of living possible—would be forced to find substitutes for oil in supplying our energy needs. Thus, environmentalists could simply “sit back” and wait for that happy event to occur—there would be no need to be alarmist regarding the fact that burning oil resulted in a transfer of carbon from below the earth’s surface to the atmosphere—thereby increasing the “greenhouse” effect, *that* resulting in increased heating among other changes in atmospheric conditions.

The current situation demonstrates, however, the error of that assumption; for if environmentalists had been “harping” on the dangers associated with the use of fossil fuels over the years, there might be enough public support for alternate fuels (e.g., biofuels, solar power, wind power) *now* so that the public would be *demanding* their development—and doing so forcefully enough to overcome the propaganda with which we are currently being inundated from the energy companies (including the coal companies, I should add).

One could argue, of course, that even if environmentalists *had* been more vocal regarding the threat posed by the use of fossil fuels, it does not follow that the *media* would have publicized their warnings. To take one example, a friend called me yesterday (July 2, 2012) to report that *The Milwaukee Journal* issue of June 30 had two important articles concerning climate change. I asked him if they appeared on the front page of the paper, and he informed me that they were, rather, *buried* in the paper. *Why* were these important articles *not* “front page” articles, given that their importance likely exceeded that of any of the other articles that appeared in the paper

that day? The only answer I can think of is that the paper is supported on partially by subscribers and other readers, but primarily by advertisers; perhaps the editors thought that such articles might “hurt business” for some of their advertisers were the articles given prominence, thereby hurting *their own* profits. This is, of course, just a guess, but strikes me as a very plausible one.

Because environmentalists have been too interested in researching rather than reporting and warning, information that *should* have been conveyed to the public, hasn’t been. Researchers have also been inhibited in reporting to the public by the fear of stirring up controversy that might affect their positions—controversy especially invented by “deniers.” And although the media have reported the findings of researchers, they have reported too little, and have not given those findings the prominence they deserve.

We find ourselves in a rather precarious position today, then. On the one hand, energy companies—perhaps the oil companies in particular—are “gung ho” on increasing their production, under the assumption that they will be able to sell their products and make a good profit. If *production* is increased—and there is every reason to believe that it *will* be—it follows that *usage* will as well. And as *usage* increases, so will the presence of “greenhouse” gases in the lower atmosphere be increased.

If the *demand* for oil could be decreased, production would necessarily decline as well. But that would require a stabilization or decrease in the total number of people on earth combined with a decrease in *per capita* consumption. But neither is likely to occur—meaning that “global warming” is likely to increase at an even faster rate than climate scientists have been predicting.

Climate scientists continue to talk about the possibility of slowing the rate of “climate change,” or even halting it, but such ideas increasingly appear to be “off the wall.” Given the trends that exist, it appears inevitable that conditions will, within a few decades, decline to a point that thousands will begin to die prematurely, societies will begin to collapse, and *that* will result in a massive die-off of the human population.

Given that very real prospect, the rational person will realize that one’s only hope for survival lies in abandoning the Existing Order for a “safe” location at which one can—perhaps with like-minded others—begin to develop a way of life capable of adapting to the changes that will be inevitably occurring. Unfortunately, what’s required is not only to be rational, but to have the financial ability to make an exit—and both of these seem to be in short supply.

Our Treacherous Minds

Alton C. Thompson

We humans are a *part* of Earth System. Our distant ancestors knew this fact *implicitly*, but especially since the Agricultural Revolution of 10,000 years ago not only have our *lives* been increasingly lived in an environment of our own making, but our *minds* have increasingly convinced us—unawares—that we humans are *separate* from Earth System. When, e.g., we use the term “environment,” we reveal this mode of thinking, for implicit in that term is the notion that the environment is something “out there” of which we are not a part.

As a consequence of this implicit “conviction” on our part, we humans have engaged in various activities, over the centuries, that have resulted in injury, hardship, and even death, to various components of Earth System—including ourselves. Rarely, however, have we been aware of the fact that our very *way of thinking* has been the fundamental culprit.

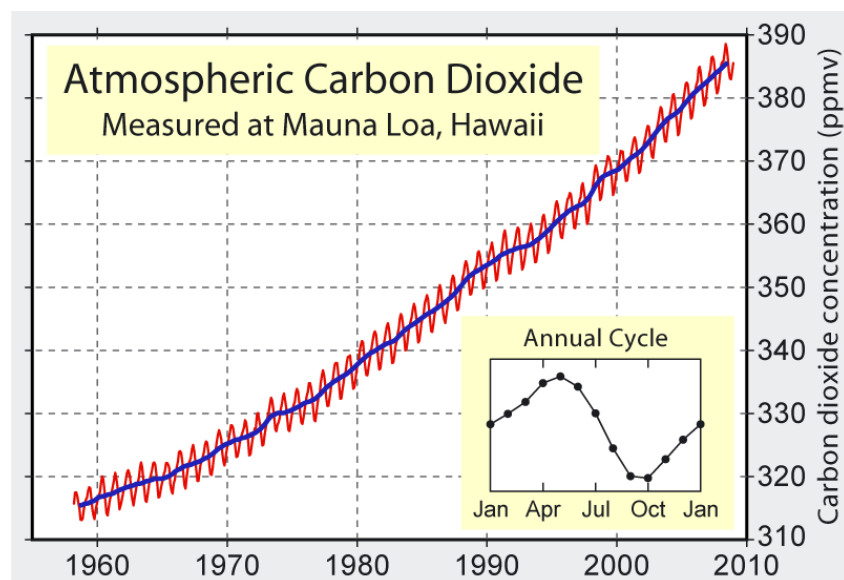
Too often developments made by some, and then adopted by others, have been perceived as clear “advances”—and *only* as advances. *Negative* consequences associated with them may not have been recognized at the time of their introduction, and may have only come to light at a much later date. Even then, those who have raised “flags” regarding possible negative consequences have typically been either ignored or categorized as “cranks.” Besides, as “advances” are adopted, they begin to shape the *way of life* of people, such that the way of life (a) on the one hand becomes dependent on continued use of the “advances,” and (b) on the other hand, the way of life itself begins to conduce *further* “advances” which *further* solidify the way of life, which . . .

Thus, after about 1750 BCE coal came into increasing use for providing heat—including heat to generate steam to drive steam engines, used in factories, trains, and ships. Still later, another fossil fuel—petroleum—came into use, and because of its greater flexibility came to overshadow coal (but not replace it). The introduction of these new energy sources resulted in more and more “progress” (in *technological* terms, at least), and the ways of life that developed in consequence became highly *dependent* on their continued use.

Well over a century ago [Svante Arrhenius](#) [1859 – 1927], while studying the ice ages, came to conclude that changes in the carbon content of the atmosphere (i.e., the “greenhouse effect”) could result in changes in earth temperature, enabling ice ages to occur from time to time. Interestingly, however, Arrhenius did not perceive an increasing greenhouse effect as a problem,

because this would “prevent the world from entering a new ice age, and that a warmer earth would be needed to feed the rapidly increasing population.”

However, around the time that the late [Charles D. Keeling](#) [1928 – 2005] began recording the carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere at the Mauna Loa (Hawaii) station in 1958, climate



scientists began to lose interest in an impending new ice age and become concerned, rather, with the possibility of a “global warming” trend—one of an *anthropogenic* nature. That is, a trend caused by the human transfer of carbon to the lower atmosphere via the burning of fossil fuels. A record of carbon dioxide change would thus be of value for proving such a relationship, for that record

could be compared to a record of temperature changes, and a correlation between the two could be given a *causal* interpretation—i.e., it was the carbon increases that were responsible for the temperature increases.

Keeling was working for the Scripps Institution of Oceanography when his ideas regarding such a correlation started to develop, and he established a recording station at Mauna Loa to be as far away as possible from nearby sources of pollution (in the form of carbon dioxide).

Despite research such as this of an observational nature, and future speculations based on such research and the known laws of physics, there are many “deniers” in our midst, and they fall into two categories:

- Those who deny that “global warming” is occurring, period.
- Those who agree that “global warming” is occurring, but deny its seriousness. Such people tend to believe that “global warming” *can* be reversed, and may be optimistic about the possibility of reversal

I, however, agree with those climate scientists who believe that:

- We have either passed the point of no return regarding “global warming,” or soon will—because of the “inertia” of our system (i.e., the fact that our societies are highly dependent on the use of fossil fuels, and there’s no likelihood of this changing in the near future).
- Given the above, along with the fact that “global warming” is a process that “feeds on itself” (i.e., changes in Earth System *themselves* become causes of *further* changes), as “global warming” proceeds, it is likely to result in numerous premature deaths (of humans, to say nothing of other species), such deaths are likely to eventuate in societal system collapse throughout the world, with societal system collapse, in turn, resulting in an *intensification* of premature deaths.

Given these possibilities—which I think of as having a high probability—it seems to me that the rational person will recognize that s/he must take action—and ASAP. *What* action(s)? Rather than trying to convince the politicians to act or trying to convince “deniers” to change their thinking, the course I recommend is to (a) identify like-minded others who agree with the two points immediately above, (b) develop plans with some of them to create a cooperative eco-community at a “safe” location, and (c) proceed with those plans. Only with such a “movement” well underway should those involved in it take the step of trying to convince “deniers” to join them—with the greatest success expected with the second type of “denier.”

Convincing others to join such a movement is likely to be a difficult matter, an issue addressed recently by psychologists Ezra M. Markowitz and Azim F. Shariff in “[Climate Change and Moral Judgement](#),” published in *Nature Climate Change* (April 2012). As the title of their article suggests, they regard a changing climate as a *moral* matter, and begin by noting (p. 243) that in a poll taken in 2011 “of policy priorities for the US government, respondents put dealing with climate change second-to-last out of 22 options. Only 26% of US citizens rated the issue as a top priority—the lowest level since it was introduced as an option on the poll in 2007.” They then note that most people have difficulty perceiving climate change as a *moral* issue, and in their “Why climate change doesn’t register as a moral imperative” section (pp. 243 – 245) identify and discuss six reasons why this is so.

They then follow that section with one (pp. 245 – 246) entitled “How we can bolster moral sentiments about climate change,” and identify and discuss six ideas regarding *that* matter. Their suggestions, briefly:

- Marshall *existing* moral values in service of concern for climate change. For example, frame “environmental degradation . . . in terms of humans profaning the sanctity of the natural world—thereby evoking the purity/sanctity foundation—both liberals and

conservatives respond with higher levels of concern, moral engagement and policy support to confront the problem.”

- Rather than focusing on the *benefits* to be received by future generations by ceasing environmental degradation now, keep in mind that “Recent findings suggest that individuals are significantly more concerned over the ethical implications of saddling future generations with burdens than they are about providing benefits.”
- Recognize that “overly dire messages about climate change can backfire with some individuals, leading to lower levels of concern and engagement.” Of relevance here, in contrast, is to recognize that “positive (moral) emotions—including hope, pride and gratitude—play [a role] in driving support for ameliorative climate change action (both politically and personally) and prosocial behaviour more generally.” Thus, attempt to couch one’s appeals in positive language.
- Communicators “should be cautious about relying solely on extrinsic values to motivate action. Using economic incentives as a motivation creates a conflict between two values—materialism and environmentalism—that have been shown to be negatively related. Moreover, recent research demonstrates that promoting extrinsic values can actively inhibit individuals from developing intrinsic, non-materialist motives (for example, virtue, affiliation) to respond to the problem.”
- “Explicitly identifying victims as future generations portrays them as individuals who can neither help us out of reciprocity for our actions nor harm us out of retribution for our inactions. Instead [of doing this, then], communicators should adopt techniques that increase individuals’ affinity and identification with future generations (for example, focusing specifically on identifiable future others such as one’s children), which ‘can diminish interpersonal distance, decrease social discounting, limit egocentric biases and enhance intergenerational beneficence.’”
- Given that “considerable social psychological research has demonstrated . . . [that] the actions of individuals are powerfully shaped by the observations of others, particularly the behaviour of important, prestigious others,” communicators “should find ways to highlight pro-environmental, prosocial injunctive norms such as prohibitions against being wasteful, which are present in many, if not all, communities around the world. At the same time, communicators must be careful not to inadvertently highlight negative, but existent, descriptive norms (for example, describing excessive electricity use), which can actually encourage individuals to follow suit in the wrong direction.”

Markowitz and Shariff have their critics (e.g., [Judith Curry](#)—who says only: The six challenges seem to me to be very difficult to overcome, and I doubt that better communication strategies will be

effective in rallying action.”), but my purpose here is neither to evaluate the list of suggestions offered by Markowitz and Shariff, nor to comment on any of their critics. My purpose here is simply to note that once a New Society movement is well underway, those involved in it should make a concerted effort to draw others into the movement. In doing so, the suggestions offered by Markowitz and Shariff—and others, for that matter—might prove useful.

The only point that I would add to the Markowitz-Shariff discussion is one that I made in the very first paragraph above—the fact that since the Agricultural Revolution, and perhaps especially over the past century—our minds have become ever more removed from the Earth System and devoted, rather, to abstractions, ideologies, etc. *That* fact is an additional reason why people have such a difficult time thinking seriously about “global warming.”

Ironically, the sort of thinking (in its *general*, but not *particular*, characteristics) that makes it *difficult* for some to recognize the threat posed by “global warming,” is what *enables* others to *understand* “global warming” and its implications. Unfortunately, people in the latter category tend to have a *research* orientation rather than an *action* one—i.e., one with an orientation to thinking about how to address problems, and then actually working to implement whatever plans of action are developed. Given this, our hope lies with those who are in *neither* of the above two categories—i.e., those who are neither deniers nor just researchers *per se*.

The sort of mentality that caused us to get into our current mess is one that we *cannot* go back to—which fact means that it may be exceedingly difficult to arrive at a solution that will be a permanent “fix.” If, however, we are *aware* of that possibility, we may be able to develop a way around it. That is my hope, at least.

[July 13, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/07/13/can-conversations-generate-light-rather-than-heat/>]

Can Conversations Generate Light Rather Than Heat?

Alton C. Thompson

Friendships develop in the first place because one finds others with mutual interests, one's physiological system *resonates* with those others, and because of that fact, one is drawn to such others as if a magnetic force were involved. Given this, it is unsurprising that we use the word "attraction" for this process.

In the past, the friendly relationships that one developed with others were of a strictly face-to-face nature, but in this age of electronics, one's "friends" may be scattered throughout the world. A relationship carried on in a face-to-face manner will, however, involve more "dimensions" than one carried on by, e.g., email, because body language, tone-of-voice, gestures, etc., are involved with the first, but not with the second—which is why "acquaintance" is perhaps a better term than "friend" for the latter relationships.

Conversations with friends at times involve conflict, but over time one learns what subjects to avoid in conversations with friends, because one values one's friendship, and does not want the bonds that connect one to another person to be severed. At times, however, a controversial subject arises during the course of a conversation with a friend, and although one of those in the conversation realizes its toxic nature and therefore does not want to discuss the subject, the other individual involved lacks that sensitivity, and proceeds to express his or her opinions on the subject. The other person may remain silent in an effort to maintain the friendship, but at times will be drawn into the discussion, and the discussion may then become heated—thereby possibly dissolving the friendship.

Family get-togethers involve relatives (including by-marriage ones) *by definition*, and because they involve *relatives* rather than *friends* (although *some* of one's relatives may also be friends—as is the case with one of *my* cousins), family get-togethers often result in acrimonious exchanges—with an uncle, a sister-in-law, or even one of one's own siblings. For this reason, although families feel an obligation to *have* get-togethers, they also tend to minimize the frequency of such gatherings. If all members of a family would have the sense to avoid bringing up controversial topics, family get-togethers could be pleasant, rather than painful, occasions. But typically one or more members of a family will lack such sense, and begin spouting off their views on some subject—often one involving politics—the tacit assumption being "I possess correct views on this subject, and therefore believe it my duty to educate you ignorant folks about the matter."

Some of those present may agree with the speaker, and welcome his or her comments. More likely, however, at least some present will disagree with the speaker. If such people keep silent, no “scene” will develop—but they may resolve to make excuses not to attend future get-togethers. If, however, some of those who disagree with the speaker begin to question statements made by the speaker, there is little likelihood that a friendly discussion will begin. Rather, the likelihood is that the speaker will become defensive, arguing will start to occur back and forth, and the get-together will start to break-up, as some of those present decide it is time to leave—and do so.

Discussions that involve *friends* may or may not be *enlightening*, but rarely generate much heat—for friends learn what topics might lead to heated discussion, discussion that might destroy their friendship, and try to avoid such topics. When *relatives* get together, however, the fact that many of one’s relatives are not friends means that such knowledge tends to be lacking. That fact, along with the fact that some present at a family get-together may lack the sense to avoid certain topics, means that family get-togethers are rarely, if ever, enlightening—and often become *heated*. Families continue to *have* get-togethers *not* because their members have a strong *desire* so to do but, rather, because they feel an *obligation* to do so.

People can have different views but that fact *need not* lead to conflictual conversations. I believe that conversations involving people with conflicting views *can* be structured in such a way that they will generate light rather than heat, but note that this would involve deliberate *structuring*—i.e., would impose an element on conversations that would be “unnatural.” For that reason, one would not expect that such conversations would occur, because of the necessity of those participating to agree to abide by the rules associated with the structuring.

Although later I will discuss possible structuring for conversations, the principal matter that I wish to discuss here is why conversations *not* involving friends so often become heated, acrimonious. Hugo Mercier has [recently noted](#) that the conventional view, since at least the time of the ancient Greeks, has been that “the role of reasoning is to critically examine our beliefs so as to discard wrong-headed ones and thus create more reliable beliefs—knowledge. This knowledge is in turn supposed to help us make better decisions. [However,] This view is hard to reconcile with a wealth of evidence amassed by modern psychology.” Mercier then refers to the “argumentative theory of reasoning,” which [states](#) that “the function of reasoning is argumentative: to find and evaluate arguments so as to convince others and only be convinced when it is appropriate. Accordingly, reasoning works well as an argumentative device, but quite poorly otherwise.”

I first learned of this theory from an [article](#) by Kathy Benjamin, entitled “5 *Logical Fallacies That Make You Wrong More Than You Think*.” The first point that she discusses is “#5. We’re Not Programmed to Seek ‘Truth,’ We’re Programmed to ‘Win.’” published in late 2011. In this

section she claims, regarding the above-mentioned theory, that it states that “humans didn't learn to ask questions and offer answers in order to find universal truths. We did it as a way to gain authority over others. That's right—they i.e., scientists] think that reason itself evolved to help us bully people into getting what we want.” And: “Our evolutionary compulsion is to triumph, even if it means being totally, illogically, proudly wrong.”

From my own reading of Mercier's “The Argumentative Theory of Reasoning” (cited above) I find no basis for such an interpretation of that theory. As a result, I sent an email to Hugo Mercier, and his response is given in a note. [1]

There *may* be some merit in the argument that humans use argumentation as a vehicle for gaining—inadvertently, if not deliberately (likely the former more frequently)—dominance over others, but I would give this tendency a *historical* rather than an *evolutionary* explanation. I would argue that the “Fall” into agriculture ([*Muddling Toward Frugality*, 1978, p. 43](#)) involved not only a change in the way we began to use our minds (in the direction, e.g., of more abstract thought, including the development of ideologies), because it removed us from the (gatherer-hunter) way of life for which we had become “designed,” it also involved a fracturing of the social bonds that had connected one human with the other humans in a given group.

Families became isolated from other families, and this affected not only peoples' interaction patterns but their psyches as well. Specifically, it resulted in a sensation of *insecurity*, and different people reacted to this sensation in different ways. Some reacted by becoming withdrawn, depressed; others by becoming boastful; still others by seeking to dominate others and/or to gain recognition, etc. In seeking (whether consciously or otherwise) domination over others, some may have done so through the use of physical force, some through the use of argumentation or other means. (Which makes one ask: Did Socrates use argumentation as a means of helping others clarify their thoughts, or as a means of gaining recognition for himself?!)

That is, I would argue that since the “Fall” neediness in its various forms—including varieties of psychological neediness—has been common, and has become ever *more* common. People have responded to this sensed neediness in different ways depending on personality, situation, etc., one way being to develop a *rigid set of beliefs*, and also strong *psychological investment* in those beliefs. Because of the latter, to verify for themselves that they are in possession of the truth, they feel a need to *express* that truth—preferably orally, rather in writing (to maximize the impact of the words). If people respond to them negatively by citing contrary truths, not only do they reject those truths, but their own set of beliefs becomes even more solidified. And, of course, the exchange with the other person becomes acrimonious rapidly.

It may very well be that this problem, having its roots in societal change away from a “natural” way of life, can be fixed *only* by restoring a modernized version of a gatherer-hunter way of life. However, as an *intermediate* solution, we could begin participating in more *structured* methods of conversation. These would be “artificial,” true, but might prove effective in helping us develop our conversation skills—including with people with who we disagree. As an example of such a method, see my discussion of the “Structured Interaction Group” in Chapter 8 of my [eBook](#).

I see participation in such an institution as having a variety of positive benefits for participants, such as (a) enabling participants to express their views honestly (with limitations), without fear of being criticized inappropriately; (b) giving participants an opportunity to learn from others who have divergent views; (c) conducting the development of novel ideas—ones that all those present might be able to accept; (d) that possibility serving to break down the barriers that exist between people, so that they might even begin to like one another, and begin to think in “us” rather than “me” terms.

One possible outcome of participation in such an institution is that ideas might be developed regarding how to “return” in a way both meaningful and possible.

Endnote

1. The email that I sent to Hugo Mercier contained the two quotations by Kathy Benjamin that I quoted above. He stated: “Indeed, that is nearly completely wrong. I try to dispel that misconception there: <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/06/15/researcher-responds-to-arguments-over-his-theory-of-arguing/?ref=arts>.

He added: “(in response to a NYT article that also somehow misrepresented our point of view) you can find more information and papers there: <https://sites.google.com/site/hugomercier/theargumentativetheoryofreasoning>.””

[July 14, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/07/14/an-interesting-slip/>]

An Interesting Slip

Alton C. Thompson

In commenting (on July 10, 2012) on the recently-published [*Explaining Extreme Events of 2011 From a Climate Perspective*](#), Deputy National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Administrator [Kathryn D. Sullivan](#) (the first American woman to walk in space) [stated](#) the following:

“Every weather event that happens now takes place in the context of a changing global environment. This annual report provides scientists and citizens alike with an analysis of what has happened so we can all prepare for what is to come.”

Her second statement seemingly *implies* that “what has happened” (in 2011) will *continue* to happen and will, indeed, *worsen* from year to year—perhaps at an accelerating rate. Given this strong possibility, we need to “prepare for what is to come.” But what should that preparation *involve*? Ms. Sullivan said not a word about *that* important matter—which fact is not, though, surprising given that expertise in *researching* something provides one with no expertise in offering suggestions regarding how to bring about *change*.

Except in a trivial way, I should add. That is, if one’s finding, as a researcher, is that a heating trend is resulting from humans’ introduction of carbon into the atmosphere via the burning of fossil fuels, and it’s evident that that introduction is having deleterious consequences, it follows that humans should cease that introduction—at least to a “sufficient” degree.

But Ms. Sullivan had the wisdom (seemingly) *not* to use that line of reasoning. In her reference to “preparation” she implied that it is now *too late* to halt “global warming”—via a cessation of the introduction of “too much” carbon into the atmosphere—because we have either passed a “tipping point” (i.e., a point of no return), or soon will. Given that it is now too late to halt the “progress” of “global warming,” our only option now is to “prepare for what is to come.”

The above reasoning is *implicit* in her statement—but I wish that she had made it *explicit*: *Why* she didn’t, I hesitate to speculate. I wouldn’t expect her to offer any *useful* suggestions on *what* we should do to “prepare,” but am at least glad that she recognizes the *need* now to prepare. By using the word “prepare” she may have said (if but implicitly) more than she had *intended* to say—i.e., it may have been a *slip*; but it should be clear that in using the word “prepare” she recognizes (if but implicitly) that our attention now—with “attention” including scientists as well

as we lay people—needs to focus on *what we need to do to prepare*. Scientists can, of course, continue with their research efforts, but *we all* need to begin to think seriously about *preparation*.

I *suspect* that when Ms. Sullivan refers to “prepare,” she assumes that the *federal government* must lead the way. She doesn’t state this *explicitly*, true, but I suspect—on the basis of no *firm* evidence, I’ll admit—that the concept of *societal system change* plays no role in her thinking, so that, by default, she would assume that because the federal government is the only agency empowered, by law, to act on behalf of us *as a people*, any preparation activity *must* be directed by the federal government.

Whether or not my above-stated suspicions regarding Ms. Sullivan and the federal government are correct, I have tried to make clear in *my* previous essays that:

- It is foolish to look to the federal government for “salvation” because it is controlled by interests (most notably the energy companies) that deny that the use of fossil fuels is a problem, and have every intention of continuing to promote the use of such fuels.
- Even if the federal government were not under that control, it is inconceivable that it would do what’s necessary to “save” us.
- The reason: “Global warming” is likely to result in a massive culling of the human population within a matter of decades; as culling begins, societies will begin to collapse; as *that* occurs, the various institutions in societies—including governments—are likely to collapse; and *their* collapse will result in a further culling of the world’s population. Even *before* our government collapses, it is unlikely to engage in the sorts of activities likely to lead in the “salvation” of at least some of us; and *after* it collapses, it will be powerless to do *anything* (obviously!).
- The above analysis suggests, then, that if one is to have *any* hope that one—and one’s children and other descendants—will survive the changes that will be inevitably occurring as a result of “global warming,” one will need to foresee the prospect of societal system collapse, and do one’s planning and acting on the basis of that prospect.
- In doing so it should be obvious that one’s best hope lies with moving from one’s current location to a location that would appear to be “safer” from the standpoint of the effects of “global warming,” and begin developing there a way of life that is as self-sufficient as possible—for when the society collapses, one will need to be dependent on *oneself*.

- In developing a new way of life it would be advisable to do so in conjunction with a small group of like-minded others—forming, with them, a small community. Before actually moving, one will, of course, need to gain the knowledge and learn the skills that will enable one to survive at one’s new location.
- Unfortunately, many in our society who might wish to follow the above advice lack the financial means to do so; given this problem, it would be most helpful if some of the rich people in our society who agree with the above reasoning would begin—ASAP—to act to help such people, and not just think about themselves.
- If no rich people in our society make an attempt to save either themselves or others, it is highly unlikely that many in our society will survive the ravages of “global warming.” Those currently living in “intentional” communities, the Amish, and a few others may have a chance to survive, but most will not.
- It’s possible that regardless of what we do, *no one* will survive the ravages of “global warming.” This possibility should not, however, deter us from at least *trying* to survive.

I have no idea whether Ms. Sullivan is thinking along these lines—I suspect that she isn’t. I am glad, however, that she let slip the idea that *preparation* is what needs to guide our thinking at the moment. *That* represents an advance in the thinking of climate scientists, and I thank her for making that advance!

Reactions to Global Warming

Alton C. Thompson

In writing this essay my intent is neither to prove nor disprove global warming *per se* (a term that is problematic, as I argued in an [earlier essay](#), but is used here anyway because of its common



usage). I *do*, however, believe that global warming is occurring, and would refer the reader to Bill Henderson's [recent essay](#) for a thorough discussion of the relevant literature, graced with numerous links to important articles on the subject.

This essay has a “people,” rather than “climate science,” orientation, in that its focus is on (a) identifying *ways* that people are reacting to the phenomenon of global warming, (b) describing *how* they are reacting, and (c) then identifying the actions (if any) that are *motivated* by their reactions.

I begin here with a *classification* (briefly stated) of the ways of reacting to the global warming phenomenon—as I perceive the matter. Note that I identify seven (7) such ways, and number each, using Roman numerals (placed at the left margin).

In discussing these ways, I refer to them by those numbers to avoid awkwardness of expression. Here, then, is my classification:

- (I) A. Not on radar
- B. On radar
- (II) 1. Denier
- 2. Not denier
- (III) a. Natural causes
- b. Anthropogenic
- (IV) 1) Legislative answer
- (V) 2) Private projects/programs

- (VI) 3) Societal system change
- (VII) 4) New society
- I Not on Radar

Although I have no data that indicates the numbers of people (absolute and relative) in the above seven categories, it seems clear to me that more in our society are in this first category than all of the other six categories combined. In asserting that for most Americans, global warming is “not on their radar,” I mean that it is not on their “[mental map](#).” That is, their reaction to global warming is one of *non*-reaction—*on the surface*, at any rate. I say “on the surface” because I suspect that although many in this category have *heard* of global warming, they have reacted to what they have heard with an unconscious feeling of fear, and their *systems* have reacted to that feeling by suppressing a knowledge of global warming from their consciousness

In addition, however, the fact that the media have not featured stories about global warming (e.g., see [this](#))—for whatever reasons (but for sinister ones, most likely!)—along with the fact that advertisements by energy companies “inform” the public in misleading, and even erroneous ways, about the use of fossil fuels; these facts mean that members of the public have been receiving reassurances that global warming is not a problem, and *that* fact helps people suppress their unconscious feelings of fear even further.

Beyond these facts, it’s clear that it is hard for *any* of us to (Eugene Linden, [The Winds of Change: Climate Weather, and the Destruction of Civilizations](#), 2006, p. 3) “imagine that we puny humans could affect something as all-encompassing as climate itself; it’s hard to imagine what it would mean if climate started changing everywhere on earth; and today even those Americans who view climate change as a threat [, tend to] see it as an event that lies far off in the future.” That is, even the most intelligent among us have difficulty “wrapping our minds” around the concept of “climate change.” Thus, for the above reasons, it is not at all surprising why for so many Americans “climate change” is not “on their radar.”

What actions do such people engage in as a result of global warming not being “on their radar”? *Nothing* relative to global warming. They continue to “contribute” to the problem by using fossil fuels—both directly and indirectly (i.e., through their purchases of goods)—and their systems “work” to divert their attention *away* from global warming by focusing their minds, instead, on entertainment, politics, sports, advertisements for new products, the “news” (with its emphasis on trivia), etc.

II

Denier

People in this category are deniers in one of two senses: Either they deny that global warming is *occurring*, or they admit that the *concentration* of “[greenhouse gases](#)” in the atmosphere is occurring, but insist that that is a good thing.

Why do some insist that global warming is *not* occurring, despite evidence to the contrary? Perhaps they like to be “contrary”—out of an unconscious need for attention. Perhaps they are “possessed” by a certain ideology that does not permit them to lend credence to scientific findings—and does not even permit them to recognize recent “climate events” as indicators that global warming is occurring. Etc.

Those who (in the second subgroup) recognize that global warming is occurring at least have a somewhat reasonable rationale for their position: In the 1970s, climate scientists were worrying about a coming *ice age* (again), and deniers of this second type may remember that fact—and argue that global warming is good because it will help counter our movement into a new ice age. The problem with that view, however, is that climate scientists *since* the 1970s have become convinced (e.g., on the basis of [Charles Keeling’s](#) recordings in Hawaii) that the *current* trend, at least, is for that suite of atmospheric changes that go under the name “global warming” to be occurring at a pace that it represents a real threat to humankind.

How do these “deniers,” of either type, respond to their reactions to the notion of global warming? Depending on their personality, they may do very little or, on the other hand, may become very vociferous in espousing their views—doing so in a manner as to indicate that they have no interest in listening to those with contrary views.

III. Natural Causes

Some of those who agree that global warming is occurring believe (or *say* they do—there’s a difference!) that geological evidence supports the view that over the millennia earth’s climate has changed drastically, and these changes have all resulted from various “natural” causes. They therefore argue that the global warming that is occurring today *also* is resulting from “natural causes” of some sort, but that we do not yet have an ability to identify those causes. We may *claim* that the climate change that is occurring at present is anthropogenic in origin but because we lack a clear understanding of climate change over geologic time, we really have no good *basis* for making such a claim.

Because people in this category hold such a view, they tend to argue that *because* the changes that are occurring are beyond our control, there’s nothing that we can do to stop, or slow down, those changes; indeed, because attempts to do so—being “unnatural”—

might actually make things *worse*, it is best to *not* try to engage in any sorts of preventive actions, and simply “go with the flow”—i.e., adapt to whatever changes occur as they occur.

Why such people ignore the view, held by most climate scientists today, that the warming that is occurring is anthropogenic is not at all clear. The *fact* that they do, however, means that they have no interest in preventive measures—and may even argue *against* such measures.

IV Legislative Answer

All of those in categories IV – VII agree that global warming is occurring, and occurring basically for anthropogenic reasons. They differ, however, in their ideas regarding *how* the problem would be best addressed, those in Group IV believing that the problem must be combated through the use of existing formal institutional means. What they mean specifically is that, given our form of government, and the fact that government is the one institution legally charged with addressing certain *national* societal problems (and also addressing problems of an *international* nature), the “appropriate” course of action is to contact one’s House of Representative member and/or Senator—and even the Executive branch, for that matter—and express not only one’s conviction that “we have a problem, Houston,” but urge those in positions of responsibility to *address*—and ASAP—the problem. In addition, one may go beyond this and *recommend*, to governmental leaders, one’s ideas as to *what* should be done, and *how*.

V Private Projects/Programs

Those in Group V have less confidence in government—perhaps because they recognize that so many members of Congress are “bought and paid for” by vested interests (energy companies, pharma, etc.)—and instead believe that the answer is to promote privately-funded and –organized projects and/or programs. Gar Alperovitz (a Professor of Political Economy at the University of Maryland), in a recent article on “[The New-Economy Movement](#),” discusses a number of contemporary such “movements”—some of them of a purely economic nature, some with a “green” orientation, etc.

Assumedly, those involved in such activities perceive their efforts as being that of creating a “model” to be emulated by others—a sort of “[city upon the hill](#)” idea, a concept of both Biblical importance, and one having historical importance in terms of the founding of this country. That is, the belief here seems to be either that those learning about such “experiments” would find them attractive, and would themselves begin engaging in similar activities; or leaders in the national government would learn of

successful such projects/programs, and work to convince their colleagues of their merits—with the hope that laws would be passed enabling the funding of such programs. (Those suspicious of government would, of course, be in the first category.)

VI Societal System Change

Whereas those in category V do not necessarily perceive their efforts as resulting in societal system change, there *are* those (i.e., Group VI people) who have come to the conclusion that it would be foolish to look to government for salvation—not only for the reason cited above, but because the *real* need is for *societal system change*, and *that* is a sort of change that the national government will *never* adopt as a goal: That it ever would is simply *inconceivable*.

Gar Alperovitz [notes](#) that:

“For the most part, advocates for change have worked within the current system of political economy,” says [Gus] Speth, a former adviser to Presidents Carter and Clinton, onetime administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and the recently retired dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, who has emerged as one of the new-economy movement’s leading figures. “But in the end,” Speth declares, “this approach will not succeed when what is needed is transformative change in the system itself.”

As Dr. Alperovitz states, “The idea that we need a ‘new economy’ [or, more broadly, a new *society*]*—that the entire economic system must be radically restructured if critical social and environmental goals are to be met—runs directly counter to the American creed that capitalism as we know it is the best, and only possible, option.*” Yet, the leaders/members of the “movements” that Alperovitz discusses all accept that as a basic premise—to varying degrees. Alperovitz notes that “what ‘changing the system’ means is a matter of considerable debate”—it seems, in fact, to be a concept that no one has *formulated* very clearly.

The fact, however, that a growing number of Americans are speaking the language of “societal system change” means that such individuals at least *sense* that the current *societal system*—not just its *economic* component—is defective, to the degree that simply passing new laws is not the answer. They are not, however, yet able to articulate what they *mean* by “new system,” and given *that*, they have not been able to provide “instructions” for “how to get there.”

VII New Society

What is perhaps the most “[radical](#)” reaction to the phenomenon of global warming is the one associated with our last group. Such people tend to believe that not only is societal system change not *possible*, but not even *desirable*. They reason that *if* societal system change were possible, and that in doing so the problem of global warming could be solved, they could not support such change because the change involved likely would be *insufficient*—for *other* reasons. They might add that such a society would likely still be a highly *unequal* one, and undesirable for that reason alone (as Richard [Wilkinson](#) has [argued](#)). (In an [earlier essay](#), this fact was on my mind when I *welcomed* the existence of “deniers”!) They might very well argue, in fact, that the *primary* reason why our society is so rotten at present is that it is highly inegalitarian, and becoming more so all the time.

Members of Group VII, in both perceiving global warming as a serious threat and perceiving problems with societal system change *per se*, argue that the only real answer is the development of a *New Society* within the rotten core of the Existing Order. They thus have a perspective rather similar to those in Group V, except that they explicitly see their task as that of creating a New Society, not just creating isolated *projects*. To a degree, people in this group overlap in orientation with those who are “[survivalists](#).” Group VII people, however, not only have an interest in *surviving*, but surviving in a *decent* manner—e.g., one that accords with our “design specifications” as humans (see Chapters 2 – 4 in this [eBook](#)).

Group VII people have, admittedly, a rather “extreme” view, but would tend to agree with Eugene Linden (*op. cit.*, p. 2) that “the risks of erring on the side of caution tend to be fewer than the costs of dismissing predicted threats out of hand.” In this case what “caution” involves is assuming the *worst* regarding global warming—assuming that it is likely to utterly decimate the world’s population, including the American population—before it runs its course, so that *drastic* action is needed if we are to have any hope of “saving” ourselves.

Even then, Group VII people would admit, there are no *guarantees* that we or our descendants will survive: It is entirely conceivable that our species will become *extinct*—if not during this century, then the next. A Group VII person would insist, however, that we must not let that possibility dominate our thinking; we *must* remain optimistic, believing that “if we do the right thing,” we will survive.

The matter of *how* to “get from here to there” was discussed in *general* terms in this 1984 [article](#), and a more *specific* idea here is to start an institute having the purpose of promoting the development of small communities—located in “safe” locations so far as

global warming is concerned, and created so as to have institutions (such as the Structured Interaction Group described in the eBook cited above) that will guarantee—so far as that is *possible*—that an *inegalitarian* society will not emerge. Etc.

The idea here is to begin a *process* that will result in a proliferation of such institutes and the communities they help foster, so that as global warming “progresses,” not only will more people be “saved” from premature death than might otherwise occur, but the New Society that emerges will be one “fit for human habitation.” Will be, that is, like the existing society in certain respects, but also *unlike* it in certain important respects.

Those in Group VII realize, on the one hand, that most in our society would be very resistant to changing their way of life—so that “messaging” such people in an effort to convince them to become participants in a New Society movement would require some creative thinking. On the other hand, many of those *having* an interest in participating in such a program would lack the financial resources to do so.

For that reason I recommend that initially *retirees* be the ones invited to participate (given that they have incomes independent of jobs), with the hope that as a “critical mass” develops with the movement, the emerging New Society will develop to the point where a lack of financial resources would not be a hindering factor for those lacking the financial resources to participate. That is, the movement will develop to the point that it will begin to have its own economy, and its former “primitiveness” will have lessened somewhat—so that it will not only be more attractive to potential in-migrants, but will be able to offer job opportunities to such people.

Initiating such a movement in the first place would, however, require financial backing by an individual or organization with means, so that the *initial* problem is for such an individual to emerge to “get the ball rolling.”

As should be evident from what I have written here and in previous essays, my “bias” favors the Group VII approach, and my fervent hope is that leadership will emerge—and very soon—so that a New Society movement can get underway.

The above, then, are the reactions to global warming that I see “out there.” As I stated earlier, it seems likely that many of my fellow Americans are in Group I—and I often feel that I am the sole member of Group VII! I would like to think, however, that there are at least dozens, if not hundreds, of people out there whose ideas overlap considerably with my own, and that *someone* in that group will be able to begin making some headway in implementing the Group VII perspective—and soon!

A New Role for the Clergy?

Alton C. Thompson

In his 1907 [*Sin and Society: An Analysis of Latter-Day Iniquity*](#), University of Wisconsin sociologist [Edward Alsworth Ross](#) [1866 – 1951] observed that (p. 135): “In the time when the family lived wholly off the produce of its own farm [but did not necessarily produce all of the *food* that it consumed], questions of the distribution of wealth and of welfare could scarcely arise.”

The society that was *emerging*, however, was one in which “questions of the distribution of wealth and of welfare” were becoming of interest to “common” people, scholars, members of the clergy (such as theologian and clergy member [Walter Rauschenbusch](#) [1861 – 1918]), etc.—for the simple reason that inequality was becoming more pronounced.



Given that a century earlier American society had been dominated by small farms, most of them being rather small and of about the same size, the society of that earlier time had been relatively egalitarian, and people growing up in it came to *value* such a society.[1] With growing inequality there developed a growing *discrepancy* between what many *valued* and what was coming to *exist*, so that it was not at all surprising that “questions of the distribution of wealth and of welfare” were being raised. Nor is it surprising—given the importance of the Bible for many in the society—that a book such as Ross’s *Sin and Society* would be published.

As the title of Ross’s book suggests, his concern in the book was with “sin,” and he *defined* “sin” this way (p. 90): “By *vice* we mean practices that harm one’s self; by *sin* we mean conduct that harms another.” Today, we might argue that practices that harm one’s self (such as smoking cigarettes, drinking to excess, “doing” drugs, being careless in one’s eating habits, etc.) *do* have the potential of also harming others—in that, e.g., if one is a family’s sole “breadwinner,” harm that one does to oneself (including suicide!) is likely to impact one’s family (and beyond)—not only financially, but psychologically. However, few today would quarrel with his definition of “sin” as behavior that impacts negatively on the well-being of others (although some might want to *expand* the term’s meaning—to include, e.g., [animal abuse](#)).

Perhaps the most famous statement in Ross's book is that (p. 40): "We need an annual supplement to the Decalogue." The *basis* for that statement was (what for him was a truism) the fact that the *nature* of sin changes as *society* changes—that (p. 3) "sin changes its quality as society develops." He went on to say (pp. 3 – 5):

Modern sin takes its character from the mutualism of our time. Under our present manner of living, how many of my vital interests I must entrust to others! Nowadays the water main is my well, the trolley car my carriage, the banker's safe my old stocking, the policeman's billy [club] my fist. My own eyes and nose and judgment defer to the inspector of food, or drugs, or gas, or factories, or tenements, or insurance companies. I rely on others to look after my drains, invest my savings, nurse my sick, and teach my children. I let the meat trust [see [this](#)] butcher my pig, the oil trust mould my candles, the sugar trust boil my sorghum [see [this](#)], the coal trust [in effect] chop my wood [now that I use coal rather than wood as my fuel], the barb wire company [in effect] split my rails.

But this spread-out manner of life lays snares for the weak and opens doors to the wicked. Interdependence puts us, is it were, at one another's mercy, and so ushers in a multitude of new forms of wrongdoing. The practice of mutualism has always worked this way. Most sin is preying, and every new social relation begets its cannibalism. No one will "make the ephah [see [this](#)] small" or "falsify the balances" until there is buying and selling, "withhold the pledge" until there is loaning, "keep back the hire of the laborers" until there is a wage system, "justify the wicked for a "reward" until men submit their disputes to a judge. The rise of the state makes possible counterfeiting, smuggling, speculation, and treason. Commerce tempts the pirate, the forger, and the embezzler. Every new fiduciary relation is a fresh opportunity for breach of trust. To-day the factory system makes it possible to work children to death on the double-quick, speculative building gives the jerry-builder his chance, long-range investment spawns the get-rich-quick concern, and the trust movement opens the door to the bubble [see [this](#)] promoter.

Many of Ross's statements here were meaningful for his time (over a century ago), but are not particularly meaningful for *our* time. However, his point—reflecting the fact that he had been born on a farm in Illinois—that as our society was moving from one where *many* households were relatively self-sufficient to a society where virtually *no one* was, individual differences in ability, personality, family background, etc., were coming to play a more important role than they had before. And whereas economists might speak blithely of a "division of labor" and its supposed (indeed "obvious") advantages, sociologists such as Ross had a more realistic view—that growing "mutualism" (i.e., dependence on others) *enabled* the "strong" (i.e., the unscrupulous, the cunning, the greedy, etc.) to take advantage of the "weak" (i.e., those "lacking" the society's dominant value system, those with lower intelligence, those lacking education, etc.). And the "strong" were increasingly *doing* precisely that.

In our society, as it had existed a century before Ross wrote his book, there was not much *need* for the society (via its governmental institutions) to play a very active role, but *that* society no

longer existed; it was becoming, ever more, a society within which interdependence existed, and for Ross this meant that because “Most sin is preying, . . . every new social relation begets its cannibalism.” There was a need, then, for the society’s leaders to *recognize* what was occurring, and then *act* to try to prevent further abuses as much as possible (those actions *not* including an intensification of praying!), and also provide *assistance* to those who were the victims of the “preying” that was occurring. Ross’s contemporary Walter Rauschenbusch may have concentrated his efforts on *religious* leaders, but Ross’s focus was more on *governmental* ones.[2]

When we think of “sins,” we usually think of the perpetrators as being *individuals*. However, Ross reminded us that as our society has “developed,” not only has interdependence increased; so has there been a growth in the size of *business* organizations, and that *organizations* can be “sinners” just as much as *individuals* can be. Not that *all* of those who comprise a given organization are *responsible* for the organization’s decisions: At times a single individual may be responsible, at times a group. But even if it is a group, *pressures* (resulting from competition) may exist in the society such that those who make the decisions for an organization may have little control over the decisions they make.

What *makes* an action—whether engaged in by an individual or an organization—“sinful” is that it causes harm, even death, to another or others. And the fact that the perpetrators involved are *clearly identifiable* means that one can *create* codes of conduct, can *update* them over time as necessary, can *educate* people regarding their content and implications (via sermons, e.g.), and can develop procedures for *enforcing* them (including procedures for apprehending violators, and bringing them to justice).

Here is an important point that has been given too little recognition, however:

Moral codes (and the legal codes that tend to parallel them) are created to contribute to the general welfare of a society. However, the general welfare is not just a function of individual and/or organizational behavior. This leaves us with the question: Given the existence of “other” factors, and the desirability of countering them in some way, (a) how should they be countered, and (b) who should have the responsibility of doing so?

I herein answer the second question by asserting that the *clergy* should assume that responsibility—which explains the title that I have given to this essay. Before specifying a (new) role for the clergy (and providing a rationale for it), however, I need to explore the fact that “the general welfare is not *just* a function of individual and/or organizational behavior.” In making that statement I am not *excluding* reference to such decision-making, but am focusing on the “*products*” of such decision-making rather than the decision-making *per se*—there *is* an important difference, and I will attempt to illustrate it here.

(One being that if ill-being results directly from *decisions*, whether by individuals/organizations, one can *exhort* the decision-makers to change their behaviors; if, however, the ill-being results primarily from *other* factors, a different approach must be used. The approach that must be used may be one not generally *expected* of clergy; clergy are, however, uniquely qualified for that role—one that they would need to *learn*, but one that is within their *capabilities* to learn.)

In identifying “other” factors here, I identify two, and then discuss each—giving particular attention to the second one.

Factor One

Much of the harm that comes to one in our society currently is a result of one’s *situation*—one’s *position* in the social structure. Harm in the form of a low income (as a result of unemployment, under-employment, or full employment that pays little) manifests itself in an inadequate diet, inadequate medical/dental care, inadequate housing (including being homeless). In a sense, one is being “exploited,” but the exploitation one experiences is not so much a result of the occurrence of *direct, explicit* exploitative behavior but, rather, the result of one’s *societal position*. Just as a “high” position in the society tends to make one “egocentric and un-empathic, greedy for rewards—financial, sexual, interpersonal, material—likely to treat others as objects, and with a dulled perception of risk” (as [Ian Richardson](#) noted recently), occupying a “low” position in the society likely also has attitudinal and behavioral implications of a rather different nature. My main point here, however, is that insofar as those in the upper reaches of the society exploit those in the lower reaches, this is done not so much as a *deliberate strategy* but, rather, as a *reaction to the position* that they occupy.

The national government’s [New Deal](#) programs during the 1930s (which may have been inspired to a degree by Ross’s book) had the intent of making our society more egalitarian, and did to a degree—at least in the sense of providing some assistance to those in dire need. But one should not even *expect* such programs today, given that our national government has come under the almost complete control of the elite. For example, members of the elite, through their lobbyists and “bought-and-paid-for” politicians, worked to repeal the [Glass-Steagall Act](#) in 1999—and *that* action helped cause the recession of 2008 (which resulted in a fall in household wealth of [\\$11.2 trillion](#) in 2008, but was a windfall for members of the elite).). In 1907, when Ross published his book, he could not have foreseen such events.

If many in our society have ill-being currently, and the *fundamental* cause of this lies in the fact that our society is highly *inegalitarian*, and becoming more so, [3], it should be obvious that this problem of ill-being not only *will* not be addressed by our national government, but *cannot* be. Now if *that’s* the case (and I sincerely believe that it is), it should be clear that the problem will

only be solved via *societal system change*. Given *that* conclusion, the question becomes: *How* can that be brought about (in a peaceful manner, of course)?

I defer an answer to the question until the next section—except that I perceive the clergy playing a role in bringing about such change.

Factor Two

Let me begin here with a series of propositions:

- Global warming *is* occurring. (A [recent essay](#) by Bill Henderson, discusses the scientific literature in detail, and provides a number of links to relevant articles by scientists.)
- It involves a *series* of atmospheric phenomena, not just a *trend* in warming: An increase in the *number* of storms, an increase in their *severity*, and an increase in variability in atmospheric conditions at any given location—there being, however, more of this at some locations than at other ones.
- It is likely to increase—and at an increasing *rate*—in *severity* over time. Scientist [Kevin Anderson](#) (also see [this](#))—an advisor to the British government on climate matters—is one of those scientists (NASA’s [James Hansen](#) is another) brave enough to speak out regarding the seriousness of the threat posed by global warming. (Many climate scientists have been cowed into silence by the “deniers” among us—who have launched vicious attacks against those who have dared to speak out regarding the science of global warming.)
- It is *already* resulting in premature deaths (from excessive heat, fires, floods, etc.), and this number is likely to *increase* over time. British scientist [James Lovelock](#) has even raised the prospect that global warming will cull about *90% of the world’s population* by 2100 CE (although he has [backed down](#) somewhat on that projection more recently).
- *If* culling, by global warming, occurs to the degree projected by some climate scientists, it is likely that at some point (40 – 50 years from now?) societies—including ours, of course—will begin to *collapse*. If and when *that* occurs, millions *more* will die because the support systems upon which they have depended will have collapsed.

An implication of the above “argument” is that our *way of life* is the source of this problem because of its dependence on the use of fossil fuels:

- Fossil fuels—coal first, and then petroleum—first came into important use around 1750 CE—i.e., when the Industrial Revolution began.

- Their use stimulated technological development, and as the *products* of that development were deployed, the absolute and *per capita* use of fossil fuels increased.
- Both increased further because technological development helped “contribute” to the growth of the world’s population.
- The burning of fossil fuels results in the transfer from carbon that had been safely locked under the earth’s surface to the atmosphere—in the form of carbon dioxide (CO₂).
- Were there no CO₂ in the atmosphere, we would not be able to exist. But as carbon is added to the atmosphere, a point is reached where “carbon sinks” are no longer able to absorb more (with deforestation—such as is occurring now in [Brazil](#)—eliminated sinks themselves), and carbon dioxide begins accumulating, and its growing concentration beginning to become problematic (increasing the global mean temperature, etc.).
- Global warming is a process that tends to “feed upon itself.” That is, as ice and snow melt, bare land is exposed; and because bare land absorbs short-wave heat energy from the sun better than does either ice or snow (and then proceeds to emit long-wave heat energy that begins to accumulate in the atmosphere, and has various effects), that heated land then “helps” heat the atmosphere further. As permafrost (in northern Canada and the Soviet Union) begins to thaw, it releases methane—a “greenhouse” gas that is about 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Etc.
- Because global warming is a process that tends to feed upon itself, there is the danger of crossing a “tipping point”—a point beyond which it becomes impossible to halt continued global warming. *We may have already crossed that point; and if we have not, we may soon do so*—because we humans have made so little significant effort to halt the process; and even if we did try (through a significant reduction in fossil fuel usage combined with the implementation of technological “fixes”), those efforts might be “too little, too late.”
- There is, then, the prospect that much of the human population will be culled by global warming and the “forces” that it will unleash—to the degree that our species may even become extinct.
- Despite the latter possibility, I remain optimistic that many will be able to survive—but only if they engage in *adaptive* activities.

Note that we humans did not *intend* for global warming to occur—it just *did*. We discovered uses for fossil fuels, began to develop and deploy those uses . . . and have developed a society that is now highly *dependent* on fossil fuels. Were a substitute energy source available to which

we could quickly switch, we would still have a problem because of the carbon that is *already* in the atmosphere: It will dissipate, but only very slowly. Besides, such a substitute does not exist at present, and even if it did, the energy companies would do their best to block a switch: The people at their helms seem to be “possessed” with a short-run mentality focused on next quarter’s “bottom line,” and are simply *unable* to consider the possibility that disaster lies ahead.

One could argue that the richer one is, the more one “contributes” to global warming (because of one’s responsibility for production via one’s consumption, personal travel, etc.), but more to the point is the fact that even the person who “contributes” the *most* to global warming does so to so small a degree as to be not readily measurable. Thus, to discuss pollution responsibility is to “beat a dead horse”—to waste one’s time and effort, when one could be using one’s time for more productive activities.

Let me now bring the language of morality into the discussion and note that because our current global warming situation is the result of innumerable actions by humans over a long period of time (so that no one *individual* bears much responsibility for the situation), *no one* has a reason to feel *guilty* for committing the sin of being a global warming “contributor.” And because of *that*, no one has any *motivation* to change his or her behavior relative to polluting. In fact, few even *know* that, e.g., driving an automobile is a “sinful” activity—because it adds carbon to the atmosphere.

If one *does* recognize that many of one’s activities “contribute” either directly or indirectly to global warming, one is faced with the question: “But what can I *do* about it? I recognize that my *way of life* is the factor that is *really* responsible for my behavior; I can make some *adjustments* in my way of life, but cannot do so to the degree of becoming a non-polluter. I recognize that if I could establish a *new* way of life for myself and family, I might be able to become a non-polluter. But I am *imprisoned* in my existing way of life because:

- I lack the *financial resources* to change my way of life.
- I lack the *knowledge/skills* to adopt a different way of life.
- I am not *capable*, psychologically, of adjusting my way of life drastically.”

It seems clear to me that (a) it is our *way of life* that is responsible for our current situation (i.e., the fact that we are faced with the threat of global warming), (b) that way of life, if continued, will lead us to disaster, and (c) that way of life is not, however, easily changed. In my recent [“Reactions to Global Warming”](#) I identify four possible solutions to the problem of global warming—which I give the brief titles “Legislative Answer,” “Private Projects/Programs,” “Societal System Change,” and “New Society”—and discuss each briefly. My conclusion: Only

the last proposal (developing a New Society) has merit—although *implementing* it presents problems:

- Leadership would need to arise to finance and “push” it.
- Given that a New Society, in its initial stage of development, would be able to offer only a rather “primitive” way of life, few would be *attracted* to it.
- In its initial stage, only (or mainly) the *retired* would be able to make the transfer, because they are among the few in our society having incomes independent of jobs; and although the retired would be *able* to make the transfer, most would likely feel that they lack the knowledge/skills for helping establish a new way of life, would find that the “primitiveness” that would likely prevail initially in the New Society would make it unattractive to them, and feel that they are not psychologically prepared to make a drastic change in their way of life.
- Even *were* a New Society program to be launched, and even were it to meet with some success, such a program would result in the “salvation” of only *some* of the population—and might even result in the salvation of *none*! That is, the program would be only a *partial* solution—a *complete* solution (i.e., saving *everyone*) not being possible.

In creating the New Society, one should not only attempt to create one that will be able to survive the ravages of global warming, but will be a “better” society than our current rotten one—e.g., will be more egalitarian. I may, in proposing the creation of a New Society, seem somewhat radical, but I *approve* of that label given its “getting to the roots” meaning. I would add ***that if we assume the worst, and prepare for the worst, but the worst doesn’t occur, we can breathe a sigh of relief; however, if we ignore the signs that global warming is occurring, and are then caught off guard, we may stop breathing entirely!***

The reason that I state that members of the clergy are well-positioned to be leaders in a New Society movement is that:

- Most of them belong to organizations with, and with access to, relevant resources, financial and otherwise.
- Members of their profession tend to be respected, so that the views that they express tend to be taken seriously.

- “Salvation” is their province; they would need only to change their orientation from the salvation of *souls* to the salvation of *lives*—even the salvation of our species from extinction.

However, just because the clergy are well-*positioned* to lead a New Society movement, it does not follow that they are well-*qualified* to do so. Regarding *that* matter they would need to:

- *Develop* qualifications; or
- *Identify* others who are qualified, and encourage/help them become leaders in a New Society movement; or
- *Help* people who are not qualified, but have an interest in becoming so, to become qualified.

My purpose here has, of course, been not so much to *help* clergy become qualified for becoming leaders of a New Society movement as to *motivate* them to do the above.

Even if it should occur that the creation of a New Society became *unnecessary* from a global warming standpoint, creating such a society would be justified in that it likely would be better than what exists now: How could it be worse?! In addition, creating a New Society would accord with the thinking of the prophet Jeremiah. For (Theodore G. Soares, [*The Social Institutions and Ideals of the Bible*](#), 1915, p. 236) that prophet “came to the conclusion that the only possibility of righteousness was in the complete destruction of the rotten organization of Hebrew society [as it existed in his time] and a fresh start. Then he expected a glorious future [to occur].”

Will some members of the clergy take advantage of this opportunity to become leaders in the creation of a New Society—or are most too mired in ritual, belief systems, and tradition, and too possessed by the [American value system](#) (greed, callousness, self-centeredness, etc.) rather than committed to a Biblical value system, to do so? It remains to be seen.

Endnotes

1. Likely this is not the *only* reason they did; e.g., the belief system that they had learned also may have had egalitarianism as one of its values.
2. President [Theodore Roosevelt](#) [1858 – 1919], having been introduced to the book by Justice [Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.](#) [1841 – 1935], may have been influenced by the book. He was so impressed with the book that he wrote a letter to Ross, which letter was then made a part of the book (following Ross’s “Preface”).

3. Inequality as a *problem* is given detailed attention in [*The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*](#), by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson (2011).

A Bedtime Story for Adults

Alton C. Thompson

Once upon a time there was a group of creatures belonging to a certain species who lived in groups, and had a rather peaceful, egalitarian existence. The male adults occupied themselves with the hunting and snaring of animals for sustenance purposes (not as a sport); but as this occupied little of their time, they spent most of their time sitting around conversing (for they had a language), telling stories, joking, etc. The adult females, on the other hand, occupied themselves with childcare, and also the gathering of edible plants, and unlike the adult males, they had the ability to do two things at once—i.e., child care while they were engaged in gathering.

Both males and females varied, of course, in their innate abilities—intellectual and other—but the females made better use of their intelligence than did the males. This was evidenced by the fact that one day one of them got the bright idea that rather than going out from time to time to gather food, it would make more sense to dig up some of the plants from which they derived food, and plant them near their camp. They began doing so—and agriculture was born. They even taught themselves how to develop the plants so that they would yield more food. Thereby, they were able to reduce their “work week” significantly, giving them more time to engage in childcare, craft activities, “gabbing,” etc.

Adult males had enough intelligence that they were at least able to realize that they were inferior to females. They realized, for example, that females could produce babies, but they couldn’t. They then “hit” on an idea to help reduce the disparity that existed between them and females: Although females had a “first birth” function, they could bringt balance into the situation by giving themselves a “second birth” function. That is, they invented rituals (“rites of passage”) that would give youth at a certain age a “born again” experience—a formal introduction into adulthood, with adult males conducting the ceremony, the ceremony being restricted to *male* youths, of course.

In addition, the adult males, not being as dumb as they looked, got the bright idea of increasing their role in the group so that they would have more control over the females and the young in the group. They did this by inventing ritualistic behaviors related to the world that they lived in, putting them into a code (e.g., the earliest version of the [Ten Commandments](#)), and then insisting that all members of the group engage (or not—in the case of “don’ts”) in those behaviors—with those failing to do so being subject to various punishments, the nature of the punishment

depending on the “severity” of the crime. This now made them feel not only *equal* to adult females, but *superior* to them.

As the females were developing agriculture, the population size of the group began to increase; and as *that* occurred, divisions began to occur with the males themselves—as class/caste divisions began to arise. And as *that* was occurring, the distribution of the population began to change; earlier, it had become increasingly sedentary, but now it was becoming divided into rural and urban—with the ruling males occupying the urban areas.

As these developments were occurring, so was another one—one that was *recognized* by no one, and *sensed* by just a few: A growing Discrepancy (see Chapter 2 of my [eBook](#)). As the society was “developing” and changing, the individuals living in it were maintaining their same biology, but now experiencing stimuli for which their bodies had not become “designed,” found themselves engaging in behaviors for which their bodies had not become “designed,” etc. The more sensitive adults—who, surprisingly were males!—sensed this Discrepancy, and in doing so became dimly aware of the fact that some in the society were experiencing ill-being—which they “instinctively” knew was “wrong.” Not only did they come to “know” this; they could perceive that the *reason* for the ill-being was that some members of the society were engaging in activities that had the direct result of causing ill-being in other members of the society.

One of them—a member of the elite—had, at some point, a “stroke of genius.” He “decided” (it was his unconscious mind at work) that what needed to be done was to “sneak” into the existing moral code some “don’ts” that related to how one should relate to other members of the society. And because of his position in the society, he was able to do so. Over time, in fact, the cultic elements in the moral code got pushed out in favor of ones that were concerned with proper treatment of others (in a negative sense). The *purpose* of the new code was, of course, to eliminate ill-being from the society—and those who had been instrumental in shifting the orientation of the moral code gradually became conscious of this fact.

To add “force” to the behavioral rules of this evolving code, the males who were shaping it invented the idea that a supernatural being—one modeled after themselves, of course—had created these rules. By diverting attention *away* from the fact that they had created the new laws and claiming, rather, that a supernatural being was their source, they hoped to put enough of the “fear of God” in their fellows that their fellow societal members would follow the laws out of a sense of fear.

Over time, however, it was becoming evident to the society’s Sensitive Ones that the existing code—with its emphasis on “don’ts”—wasn’t getting the job done. For ill-being still existed in the society, and it was not obviously resulting from ill-treatment of certain individuals by *other* clearly-identifiable individuals. Given this, there was the question: What can be done to solve

the society's ill-being problem? Someone then again came up with a brilliant answer: Just as the old cultic code had some "shoulds" in it, it was time to make the moral code consist primarily of "shoulds"—and the result was a famous passage in [Job](#), and another one in [Matthew](#).

What occurred, then, was the creation of *positive* rules: When you learn of others in need (such as the [Good Samaritan](#) did), you should feel an *obligation* to do what you can to help them, and act out of that sense of obligation rather than one of fear. This might involve direct help, might involve voting for bills that would provide help to those in need, etc. (In addition, [research](#) has questioned the claim that we are "naturally" self-centered, and found that both helpee and helper benefit from helping, suggesting that another strategy might be to *publicize* that fact in an effort to promote direct helping.) Thus, *positive* codes arose because of the fact that as society was changing, *negative* codes were no longer accomplishing their purpose well (of preventing ill-being from occurring). And perhaps such codes have "worked" to some extent since that time.

But what if the society becomes highly inegalitarian, and the government comes under the control of rich individuals. Given that such individuals—[because of their position](#)—are likely to be self-oriented, they are not likely to be interested supporting charities or introducing bills designed to help the needy, etc.—and may even work to *reduce* such efforts in existing bills, or even work for their repeal. (Also, they may engage in outsourcing—which causes unemployment, and adds to the ill-being in the society). In addition, because their position tends to make them reckless, they engage in activities—either direct ones, or ones through the government they now control—that may result in "crashes," which reduce the wealth of many, put people out of work, result in foreclosures, etc. Given that situation, private charity may be insufficient to "take up the slack" so that ill-being festers in the society. What to do about that fact? "Improving" the moral code is obviously not the answer. The situation seems bleak—even hopeless. But wait! When we recognize another problem, this helps us recognize that by addressing *that* problem, there is an opportunity simultaneously to address *this* problem—so that it would be foolish not to do so.

Let me state that other problem in the form of a series of questions: What if the *way of the life* associated with the society is a high-energy one based on the use of fossil fuels, and that it is discovered that the carbon thereby introduced into the atmosphere is causing greenhouse warming, and that *that* is impacting human life, directly and indirectly, in various negative ways. Assume also that scientific studies conclude that this situation is likely to worsen—either because there is no prospect of a switchover to "safe" sources, or because even if this would occur *tomorrow*, the tipping point has already been passed—to the point that (a) it cannot be halted (even with technological fixes), and (b) will worsen, so that (c) more and more will die, the culling will (d) become so severe that at some point societies will begin to collapse, and when that starts to occur, (e) even more will die prematurely. What to do about this?

It's obvious that the *only* answer is to begin developing a *new way of life*—one that will be able to withstand the ravages of global warming. And because that in itself will not solve the *first* problem mentioned, it makes sense to develop this new way of life in a way that will simultaneously address that *problem*—by ensuring that an *inegalitarian society* does not arise.

By doing this, one would not only be able to address the problem of ill-being, but the threat posed to life itself by global warming. How does my story end? I wish I knew!

[August 2, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/08/02/rhombney-mormonism-or-americanism/>]

Rhombney: Mormonism or Americanism?

Alton C. Thompson

(For insight into my deliberate misspelling of “Romney” see [this.](#))

In a recent interview, conducted by British journalist [Piers Morgan](#), U. S. presidential candidate Mitt Rhombney, [stated](#):

"There are people who are trying to attack success and are trying to attack our [i.e., Mitt Rhombney's] success. That's not going to be successful," Romney told CNN's Piers Morgan. "When you attack success you have less of it, and that's what we've seen in our economy over the last few years."

"Dividing America based on who has money and who hasn't—who is successful and who is less successful. That is not the American way," he said.

The article (“Romney to Democrats: Stop attacking success”), dated July 26, 2012, went on to note:

The full [CNN interview](#) aired Thursday night.

Romney is worth [i.e., has assets of] up to \$250 million, according to his financial disclosure report, and is one of the wealthiest presidential candidates to run for the White House in decades. His wealth comes from his work [a word that should perhaps be put in quotation marks!] at Bain Capital, the private-equity company he co-founded.

It is well-known that Rhombney is a Mormon, [Mormonism describing](#)

itself as falling within world Christianity, but as a distinct restored [dispensation](#), through which it characterises itself as the only true form of the Christian religion to be in existence since the time of the Great Apostasy. According to Mormons, a [Great Apostasy](#) began in Christianity not long after the [ascension of Jesus Christ](#). This Apostasy involved the corruption of the pure, original Christian doctrine with [Greek](#) and other philosophies, and followers dividing into different ideological groups. Additionally, Mormons claim the [martyrdom](#) of the [Apostles](#) led to the loss of [Priesthood authority](#) to administer the Church and its ordinances.

Mormons believe that God re-established the [early Christian](#) Church as found in the [New Testament](#) through the agency of Joseph Smith. In particular, Mormons believe that angels such as [Peter](#), [James](#), [John](#), and [John the Baptist](#) appeared to Joseph Smith and others and bestowed various [Priesthood](#) authorities on them. Mormons thus believe that their Church is the "only

true and living church" because of divine authority was restored to it through Smith. In addition, Mormons believe that Smith and his legitimate successors are modern prophets, seers, and revelators who receive revelation from God to guide His Church. They maintain that other religions have a portion of the truth and are guided by the [Light of Christ](#), despite their having been condemned by Jesus Christ as "an abomination in My sight" in Joseph Smith's first vision. Thus, in Mormon terms, non-Mormon Christians can have the [influence of the Holy Ghost](#) to lead them to the truths of the Gospel (i.e. the Mormon revelation, interpretation, and restoration of the original Gospel of Jesus Christ as delivered to the Apostles before the Great Apostasy), while these non-Mormons lack the [Gift of the Holy Ghost](#) given to all orthodox LDS members.

A web site on [Mormonism](#) states that "[Mormons believe](#) in the same path to eternal life that the Savior taught while on the earth." Given that that path is contained in [Matthew 25](#), the implication is that Mormons believe that:

³¹"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

⁴¹"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

⁴⁴"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

⁴⁵"He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

⁴⁶“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

When Rhombney’s statements regarding “success” (quoted above) are examined in the light of the above Matthean passage, the question arises: Is Rhombney a:

- Good Mormon;
- Good American;
- Both; or
- Neither?

Not being a Mormon myself, my knowledge of Mormonism comes from the web sites quoted above—the key claim being that Mormons accept “the same path to eternal life that the Savior taught while on the earth” (as described in Matthew 25). To answer the question regarding whether Rhombney is a good American or a good Mormon (or both, or neither), however, we need a list of *American* values comparable to the Matthew 25 list. Here is one example, derived from Stan Nussbaum’s [*American Cultural Baggage: How to Recognize and Deal With It*](#) (2005). I specifically derive my list from [this](#) source, entitled “The ‘Ten Commandments’ of American Culture”:

1. Be a success.
2. Be tolerant.
3. Have lots of fun.
4. Shop till you drop.
5. Just do it. (“We are a people of action. We do not like too much planning.”)
6. Do whatever you can while you have the chance.
7. Stand up for your rights.
8. Think for yourself.
9. Don’t waste time [in your effort to be a success].
10. God helps those who help themselves; i.e., work hard. “For most Americans, God is much less a concern than success, money and time.”)

To be a good Mormon, one’s behavior must conform to the Matthean list quoted above, and to be a good American, the above list of “10 commandments.” Conceivably, one’s behavior could

conform to *both* lists—or even to neither. The question, then, is: In which of the four categories identified above should Rhombney be placed?

Before addressing that question I will make a few comments on the Matthean list, followed by some comments on the above 10 American commandments—from the perspective of the Matthean list.

The Matthean List

Note that the Matthean list, first, differs from the [Ten Commandments](#) with which we are familiar in that only two of the Ten Commandments are of a positive nature (observe the Sabbath, and honor your parents), whereas the items on the Matthean list are *all* of a positive nature—all involve doing *for* (not *to*!) others. Second, the items on the Matthean list are not *explicit* commands (as is the case of the Ten Commandments), but *implicitly* are. Third, note that the “commands” on the Matthean list make no promise that the person who follows them will be “blessed” (“successful”) in *this* life; rather, the promise refers to an *afterlife*: The “sheep” (i.e., the “righteous”—those who live by the six “commands”—are promised “eternal life,” the “goats” are promised “eternal punishment.”

Fourth, the fact that the items on the Matthean list are not *stated* as commands suggests that the intent was that they be taken as *suggestive* rather than limited to the six items on the list—so that one should feel free to interpret them in a manner appropriate for one’s interests, personality, resources, etc. Fifth, although the list seems to suggest that one should provide help to those in need *whether they want it or not*, in this Age of Psychology the expectation is that one would be sensitive to the feelings of others, and except for cases of dire need, would provide help only to others who would not be offended by the help, and would do so in a manner that would not be condescending.

Finally, it should be noted that the six “commands” are stated cleverly from a literary standpoint—in the form of a *story*. Use of this device enables the commands to be repeated *four* times—thereby emphasizing their utter importance. This story in Matthew parallels the story of the Good Samaritan in [Luke 10](#), but is more “to the point,” and with repetition that would not be possible in the Samaritan story.

The 10 American “Commandments”

My goal in this section is to comment on the 10 American commandments from the perspective of the Matthean list:

1. *Be a success.*

The Matthean list is *other-* rather than *self-*oriented; it is not surprising, then, that it does not *advocate* becoming successful—and gives no indication of even *valuing* success. Indeed, given that the [more successful](#) is, the more selfish one tends to be, there *is* good reason for excluding this from the Matthean list. Of course, just because a *tendency* exists for selfishness increasing with income, it does not follow that *all* of the poor are generous with the little that they have, and that *all* of the rich are stingy. For example, my dad’s mother worked in the household of Otto Y. [Schnering](#)—founder of the Curtis Candy Company—prior to her marriage, and upon her marriage the couple was given several gifts by Otto (that generosity remembered in the fact that my dad’s brother was named Otto Raymond). Otto was the sort of employer who treated his employees as part of his family—but the fact that his company was relatively small made this more likely than would otherwise have been the case.

2. *Be tolerant.*

This “command” suggests that one should do no harm—physical or psychological—to others, but being merely tolerant of others involves no *helping* activity.

3. *Have lots of fun.*

What this typically means for Americans is to engage in any number of activities, but not including activities that might be helpful to others. The strange thing about this interpretation is that (as, e.g., Dacher Keltner has pointed out in [Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life](#), 2009) we humans seem to be “hardwired” to obtain contentment from engaging in helping activities. This implies that our notions of what gives us happiness may come more from the advertising with which we are bombarded than from our biology. Charles Darwin may have argued that we are products of “natural selection” (i.e., a competitive process), but Darwin was simply wrong—his “theory” reflecting the nature of Victorian society rather than the natural world. See [this](#), e.g.

4. *Shop till you drop.*

Given that most shopping is for *oneself* (or members of one’s family, or friends), this is an activity that has little, if any, bearing on the Matthean list.

5. *Just do it.* (“We are a people of action. We do not like too much planning.”)

True, we are an action-oriented people, but for most Americans their “doing” has little or no bearing on the Matthean list.

6. *Do whatever you can while you have the chance.*

Point 5 referred to the fact that for most Americans advance planning plays little role in their lives; point 6 simply repeats point 5 in emphasizing our orientation to the present rather than the future (or even the past, for that matter). Again, most of the “doing” engaged in by Americans is self-oriented.

7. *Stand up for your rights.*

This “[don’t tread on me](#)” philosophy—which has been adopted by the [Tea Party](#)—expresses a legitimate point of view—that one has a right to not be exploited, hurt, etc., by others. Note, however, that it is a purely self-oriented “command.”

8. *Think for yourself.*

Americans may *claim* that they think for themselves, but the fact of the matter is that our society is a highly conformist one; thus, one tends to be very reluctant to express views that are unusual—especially ones that might be construed as “unpatriotic.” One dare not even express the views that Matthew 25 expresses what religion should be about—rather than certain rituals or beliefs!

9. *Don’t waste time [in your effort to be a success].*

This can be regarded as a restatement of points 5 and 6, in that it has the *present* as its focus. It is action-oriented, with the actions involved being self-oriented—the primary goal of one’s actions being one’s own success. Doing for others is rarely a part of this not wasting time.

10. *God helps those who help themselves; i.e., work hard.* “For most Americans, God is much less a concern than success, money and time.”)

The phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is about as far removed from the viewpoint expressed by the Matthean list as it is possible to get: The Matthean list is concerned with doing for *God* by doing for *people*—the *least* of these, in fact. *This* “commandment,” in contrast, turns the relationship on its head by emphasizing God doing for *oneself*. “Pious” Americans are in the habit of thanking God for the blessings that God has bestowed upon them, not realizing that they thereby commit the blasphemy of ignoring *their* responsibilities as expressed in Matthew 25.

Conceivably, one’s “hard work” *could* be directed at giving attention to the Matthean list—and for some Americans that’s the case. For *most* Americans, however, insofar as one engages in “hard work,” one does so to advance oneself; and if one steps on others in

one's upward climb, that's because morality plays little role in one's thinking. How *can* it, given that one is "possessed" by a drive to become as successful as possible?

Answering the Questions

Earlier in this essay I asked whether Rhombney was a good Mormon, a good American, both, or neither. The above discussion should make clear that although some elements of the 10 American commandments *could* be interpreted in a way compatible with the Matthean list, few Americans so interpret them. Rather, for most Americans the 10 American commandments are interpreted in a way that is *totally incompatible* with the Matthean list. Rhombney's valuing of success (as indicated in the quotation that began this essay) means, then, that he is a good American, but thereby *not* a good Mormon. Given this, it is surprising that he has not been excommunicated from the Mormon religion—that, rather, he has occupied important positions within that religion!

Dr. Brian Moench (an ex-Mormon, who is member of the Union of Concerned Scientists), in his recent "[Romney: Gold Medal in Dishonesty](#)," chastises Rhombney:

Mitt and Ann Romney will soon be heading to the London Summer Olympics in pursuit of a gold medal with their dressage horse, Rafalca. I think Mitt already has a gold medal wrapped up. Maybe not for horse dancing, but for mental gymnastics, and by that I mean lying. And not just for lying about his Bain Capital tenure, or being deliberately deceitful about Obama. I think a serious fundamental defect in Mitt Romney has been on display for a long time.

And states that:

Mitt was distinctly impersonal [in his interactions with me] and it seemed his interest in me was only to the degree that I could further his career, which I couldn't—I had no pedigree to enhance the value of my Harvard appointment. He was nakedly ambitious and it was widely assumed he would eventually run for President.

And:

Mitt's interaction with his religion is indeed a legitimate issue for voters, but not for the reasons that have been raised by evangelicals. It is not because Mormonism is a non-Christian cult. Mitt's significant leadership positions in the Mormon Church evokes a much deeper connection to his religion than any other presidential candidate in modern history has had to their religion. Reaching this rather exalted state within the Church hierarchy is supposed to manifest not just one's extraordinary commitment to the Church, but also to behavior and a value system beyond reproach. A Mormon Stake President is expected to live an exemplary, Christ-like life. Therefore it is not only fair, but important to ask: does Mitt's behavior and value system meet those lofty expectations?

Moench would clearly provide a negative answer to that question. And *that* fact suggests, in turn, that Mormonism is as much of a sham as are most Christian denominations. But that's another matter. My points here are that (a) Mormonism and Americanism are incompatible; that (b) although Mitt Rhombney occupies an important position within the Mormon religion, Moench is correct in concluding that Rhomney is not a good Mormon; but that (c) Rhomney *is* a good American.

For what *that's* worth, I must add!

[August 3, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/08/03/mckibben-on-our-uncertain-future/>]

McKibben on Our Uncertain Future

Alton C. Thompson

[William E. McKibben](#)—better known as Bill McKibben—has been engaged in perhaps the most important writing and activism of any American—of any *human*, in fact—during the past few decades. Currently the Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Middlebury College (in Vermont), Bill’s [website](#) lists the 14 books he has authored since 1989 (*The End of Nature* being his first book), along with the numerous articles that he has written (to which links are provided). Over two decades ago Bill had the foresight to recognize the most important problem faced by us humans at present—what is commonly referred to as “global warming,” or “climate change”—and ever since has been writing about this problem, and engaged in activism to alert the public to this threat. In 2009, for example, he led the organization of [350.org](#), which involved “5,200 simultaneous demonstrations in 181 countries.” (“350.org takes its name from the research of NASA scientist [James E. Hansen](#), who posited in a 2007 paper that 350 parts-per-million ([ppm](#)) of [CO₂ in the atmosphere](#) is a safe upper limit to avoid a climate [tipping point](#).”)

Bill’s most recent article—“[Global Warming’s Terrible New Math](#)”—was published in *Rolling Stone* magazine, on July 19, 2012. In this article McKibben discusses three important numbers related to global warming, the first being **2° Celsius**—equivalent to about 3.6° Fahrenheit. He notes that (a) the Copenhagen climate conference of 2009 “formally recognized ‘the scientific view that the increase in global temperature should be below two degrees Celsius.’” To date (b) the earth’s mean temperature has been raised (by human activity) by almost 0.8° C.—so that we have almost gotten half way to that point. And (c): “‘Any number much above one degree involves a gamble,’ writes Kerry Emanuel of MIT [the Massachusetts Institute of Technology], a leading authority on hurricanes, ‘and the odds become less and less favorable as the temperature goes up.’” Thus, some experts believe that 1° C. is a more reasonable number to accept as a “safe” increase—meaning that some climate scientists believe that we are now very close to the danger point.

McKibben also notes, however, that “computer models calculate that even if we stopped increasing CO₂ now, the temperature would likely still rise another 0.8 degrees [Celsius], as previously released carbon continues to overheat the atmosphere.” This is a profoundly disturbing fact, for two reasons:

- It implies that although we have not yet reached the 1° C. temperature rise that MIT’s Kerry Emanuel has identified as the critical temperature, it is *inevitable* that we *will*

reach, and *pass*, that point—even if “we stopped increasing CO₂ now.” Which *won't* happen, of course.

- If the more “liberal” 2° C. is taken as the critical point, a 1.6° C. increase is inevitable, and given that we humans show no signs of ceasing to “contribute” carbon to the atmosphere, it seems inevitable that a 2° C. will occur.

When it will occur is a matter of conjecture; but *that* it will occur seems to be inevitable. Two years ago McKibben wrote [*Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough Planet*](#), inventing the term “Eaarth” to indicate that the planet that we are living on is a new one—one unlike the one any of our ancestors lived on. Today, there is no reason *not* to believe that Eaarth will be changing *even more*—perhaps at an accelerating rate—and may very well change so much as to be uninhabitable by us humans (to say nothing of many other species).

The second number that McKibben discusses is **565 gigatons**: “Scientists estimate that humans can pour roughly 565 more gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere by midcentury and still have some reasonable hope of staying below two degrees.” But the problem here is that “study after study predicts that carbon emissions will keep growing by roughly three percent a year—and at that rate, we’ll blow through our 565-gigaton allowance in 16 years, around the time today’s preschoolers will be graduating from high school.” Note here that the 565 gigaton number is premised on a 2° C. *rise* in temperature being “safe.” If a “safe” rise is just 1° C. (as is argued by MIT’s Emanuel), the implication is that *that* level will be reached in 8 to 10 years. Whether we reach—and pass—the “safe” point in 10 years or 16 years, the fact of the matter is that *there is very little time left before the “safe” point is reached, and surpassed.*

The third number given attention by McKibben is **2,795 gigatons**: This “number describes the amount of carbon already contained in the proven coal and oil and gas reserves of the fossil-fuel companies, and the countries (think Venezuela or Kuwait) that act like fossil-fuel companies. In short, it’s the fossil fuel we’re currently planning to burn. And the key point is that this new number—2,795—is higher than 565. Five times higher.” Thus, if 565 gigatons represents the “safe” amount of carbon that can be transferred to the atmosphere—a number that Kerry Emanuel of MIT would dispute—and our plans, as humans, are to *continue* to use fossil fuels, it’s clear that we humans are on a suicidal course.

We won’t be *able* to burn up all of the fossil fuel that we are planning to burn, of course, for the simple reason that at some point in time after we cross the “threshold” of safety—whether it is at 1° C. or 2° C.—our society will collapse. Other societies will also collapse, but the high degree of specialization that characterizes the American economy makes it especially susceptible to collapse. It [*collapsed*](#) after the “crash” of 1929, but only *relatively*; the sort of crash that occurs in the *future* will be an *absolute* one—one which will take a massive toll in human life, and change the way that survivors (if there are any!) live. It is, of course, impossible to know *exactly*

what the future has in store for us humans, but it's, clear that even if living *is* possible, it will be difficult; and that those with the best chance to survive will be those who have made *plans* for the future, and have begun to *act* on those plans. The fact that planning is anathema for most Americans suggests that even if human life is still *possible* in, say, 50 years, few Americans will take advantage of the opportunities for survival that *do* exist—and will thereby commit suicide, in effect (i.e., will perish for one reason or another as global warming increases in severity).

McKibben states:

People perceive—correctly—that their individual actions will not make a decisive difference in the atmospheric concentration of CO₂; by 2010, a poll found that "while recycling is widespread in America and 73 percent of those polled are paying bills online in order to save paper," only four percent had reduced their utility use and only three percent had purchased hybrid cars. Given a hundred years, you could conceivably change lifestyles enough to matter—but time is precisely what we lack.

McKibben is correct in stating that most people recognize that their *individual* actions—as inmates of the Existing Order, I would add—have little relevance for global warming; the problem with many in our society, however, is that they fail to recognize *the impact of the members of our species as a collective unit*—or even *deny* that global warming is occurring: Somehow they are unable—or unwilling—to “read the handwriting on the wall,” i.e., the signs of global warming that are evident even now. Because of this, few in our society are doing anything to prepare for the future—including contacting their Representative or Senator, urging *them* to act.

McKibben seems to place his hope for the future in the development of a Movement of some sort, and states: “A rapid, transformative change would require building a movement, and movements require enemies.” What enemy can be identified? The “planet does indeed have an enemy—one far more committed to action than governments or individuals. Given this hard math, we need to view the fossil-fuel industry in a new light. It has become a rogue industry, reckless like no other force on Earth. It is Public Enemy Number One to the survival of our planetary civilization.”

But does our “salvation” lie in identifying the fossil-fuel industry as the enemy? I perceive several problems with McKibben’s thinking:

- He doesn’t seem to recognize the implications of reaching, and then crossing, the “tipping point”—the point of no return. He seems to recognize *that* we will cross this point, and do so within a few years, but doesn’t seem to recognize that the disruptions that will thereby be occurring in our economy will be such as to cause not just hardship

for many, but violence, deaths on a massive scale—and an eventual collapse of our society, which “event” will be followed by even more deaths.

- Making the fossil-fuel industry “Public Enemy No. 1”—which is not likely to occur anyway!—will do nothing to prevent the tipping point from occurring—for the simple reason that *nothing* can prevent it from occurring (including some sort of technological “fix”). Trying to initiate a movement that will identify this industry as the “enemy”—which it *is*, of course—is akin to “[fiddling while Rome burns](#)”—an utter waste of precious time.
- Given the disruptions that will be occurring in our economy as a result of global warming, food will become not only increasingly *expensive* (e.g., the price of what we call “corn” in this country—maize in other countries—will be going up given the drought that has been gripping much of the United States), but increasingly difficult to *obtain*, period. *That* fact will result in violence and starvation—and will eventuate in societal collapse.

Those able to perceive what is “on the horizon” for us humans will realize that one’s only hope for survival is plan *how* one will adapt to the changes that will be inevitably occurring, and then *act* on one’s plans—ASAP. As I have offered many comments relative to this in previous essays on this site, I will say nothing further here on the matter.

[August 6, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/08/06/the-growing-obsolence-of-moral-codes/>]

The Growing Obsolence of Moral Codes

Alton C. Thompson

“Morality”—from the Latin *moralitas* (meaning “manner, character, proper behavior”)—primarily refers to *behavior*, with *moral* behavior being “good,” or proper, behavior, and *immoral* behavior being “bad,” or improper, behavior. A related concept is that of *amorality*, [which is](#) “variously defined as an unawareness of, indifference toward, or disbelief in any set of moral standards or principles.” Related concepts are “mores” and “folkways,” the difference here being [that](#) “mores ‘distinguish the difference between right and wrong, while folkways draw a line between right and rude.’”

A moral *code* is an *explicit* statement of the “behavioral rules” associated with a given society or group within a society. I say “rules” rather than “rule” because, although the behavioral rules of a society/group are, at times, “boiled down” into a *single* rule (such as the [Golden Rule](#)), the fact that a single rule is necessarily *abstract* means that it is subject to varying interpretations. Thus, a single behavioral rule is typically supplemented with *specific* rules that “flesh out” the general rule. Not only does this *clarify* the behavior expected of members of a society/group; in doing so it reduces the opportunities for varying interpretations.

From a historical standpoint, mores and folkways preceded the development of moral codes. Given this, it is not surprising that societies/groups with moral *codes* tend to be ones that have (or had) *written* languages—so that the moral code of the group is written on some medium. (For example, the Ten Commandments were said—[Exodus](#) 24:12—to have been written on *stone*—by God.)

How “good” (and “bad”) behavior has been defined has varied between societies/groups, and also over time. For example, in [Exodus 34](#) we find this passage:

¹⁰Then the LORD said: “I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you. ¹¹Obey what I command you today. I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ¹²Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. ¹³Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles. Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

¹⁵”Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land; for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices. ¹⁶And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same.

¹⁷”Do not make any idols.

¹⁸”Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread. For seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv, for in that month you came out of Egypt.

¹⁹ “The first offspring of every womb belongs to me, including all the firstborn males of your livestock, whether from herd or flock. ²⁰Redeem the firstborn donkey with a lamb, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem all your firstborn sons. No one is to appear before me empty-handed.

²¹”Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest.

²²”Celebrate the Festival of Weeks with the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, and the Festival of Ingathering at the turn of the year. ²³Three times a year all your men are to appear before the Sovereign LORD, the God of Israel. ²⁴I will drive out nations before you and enlarge your territory, and no one will covet your land when you go up three times each year to appear before the LORD your God.

²⁵”Do not offer the blood of a sacrifice to me along with anything containing yeast, and do not let any of the sacrifice from the Passover Festival remain until morning.

²⁶”Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God.

“Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

²⁷Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” ²⁸Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.

The passage above begins this way: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.’” (For an explanation of *why* the breakage occurred, we need to go back to [Exodus 32:19](#): “When Moses approached the camp and saw the [golden] calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain.”)

Note that in verse 28 this code of conduct is identified as the *Ten Commandments*—and is presumably the initial version of the [Decalogue](#).. “Ten Commandments” is an odd name for this set of commandments, however, given that there are more ten listed (the *exact* number depending

on *what* one includes on one's list, and how one *groups* commandments—if one does). Its references to celebrating the festival of unleavened bread and a bringing of firstfruits are *positive* commands, but the bulk of the commands are of a *negative* (“do not”) nature. Of *most* interest here, however, is the fact that these commandments are basically of a *cultic* nature—i.e., ones that, from the perspective today, are *devoid* of moral content. For the prevailing notion *today* regarding what makes a behavior moral is its *impact* on others: Behaviors that are harmful to others are immoral (“bad”), those that are helpful to others moral (“good”).

Behaviors referred to in a moral code may also become expressed in formal *laws*, but laws tend to differ from moral rules in at least two respects:

- Moral rules can be either of a positive or negative nature. For example, the version of the Ten Commandments in [Deuteronomy](#) consists of eight commandments stated *negatively* (some of a cultic, rather than moral, nature) and two stated *positively* (observe the Sabbath, and honor your parents). The five “commands” in [Job](#), however, are all of a *positive* nature; as such, their purpose is to *encourage* people to engage in the behaviors enjoined by the “code.”

Laws, in contrast, tend to state *prohibitions*—to specify those behaviors that one should *not* engage in.

- With a moral rule *per se* there are no penalties associated with a failure to follow *negative* rules; benefits may, however, be promised for following the *positive* rules. The expectation is that one will feel an *obligation* to follow the rules, whether positive or negative, and in addition will follow the positive rules because of the personal benefits said to be gained by following those rules.

Laws not only specify those behaviors that one should *avoid* (and *only* such behaviors); they specify *penalties* for failure to avoid those behaviors—the nature of the penalty depending on the severity of the “crime.” *Because* of this fact that penalties are associated with a failure to “obey the law,” an enforcement apparatus is required—for (a) apprehending violators, (b) determining what punishment is to be administered, and (c) then actually administering that punishment (e.g., collecting a fine, incarcerating, providing “corrective” treatment, executing).

Traditionally, moral codes have been directed at (human) *individuals*, and have been instituted in recognition that some (but not all) of the ill-being that exists in a society exists because the behavior of some individuals is impacting negatively on the well-being of other members of the society; the *purpose* of the moral code, then, is to prevent the *future* occurrence of such behaviors—and the code may be supplemented with a set of *laws* (with accompanying enforcement apparatus) to add “force” to the components of the moral code.

Over time, as it becomes evident that the *negative* moral rules (and accompanying laws) are not solving the ill-being problem that exists, *positive* moral rules are introduced and the society's members are encouraged also to follow *those* rules also. As these have no *penalties* associated with them for non-compliance, the society's members are encouraged to “put themselves in the shoes” of those in the society with ill-being, thereby feel empathy for them, and act to decrease their ill-being. Etc. Thus, if the ill-being of a societal member can be attributed to an accident, a disease, etc.—rather than the actions of another societal member—the goal of positive rules is to address ill-being having its source in such “other” factors.

The institution of positive rules may or may not “work” to achieve its intended end—that of eliminating ill-being from the society. That is, regardless of the arguments put forth for why the “good” person should follow these positive “commands,” not enough people may do so to eliminate ill-being in the society. What may be done then is for those determined to “correct” this problem to engage in political activity with the intent of getting laws passed that will initiate *programs* to address the ill-being problem that exists in the society. The various programs that constituted the “[New Deal](#)”—enacted in response to the Depression the country was then in—are examples of this.

Despite this latter fact, ill-being is currently widespread in our society, and if anything is becoming even more so. In addition, a new factor has begun to enter the picture—a factor currently responsible for but a small portion of the ill-being that exists, but a factor that shortly will be causing not only increased ill-being, but deaths on a massive scale—with even the possibility of causing the extinction of our species (along with many other species). Because of recent developments in our society, there is not only a need for a revised moral code (and accompanying set of laws); increasingly, the problem of *ill-being* itself will fade into the background, and the problem of *survival*, rather, will emerge as our primary concern. This latter fact means that moral codes and laws *must* play a lesser role in our society, and *new* means must be developed to address the ill-being/survival problem that looms ahead.

First, though, we need to become aware of the *sources* of the threats that face us currently:

- *Organizations* such as business corporations—and governmental units themselves. For example, reckless behavior by firms in the financial sector (enabled by repeal of the [Glass-Steagall Act](#) in 1999) resulted in a fall in [household wealth](#) of \$11.2 trillion in 2008. And the U. S. government's bogus [war against Iraq](#) cost our country the lives of about 4,500 service people, and several hundred thousand Iraqis (and our President was not prosecuted for being a war criminal!).
- Members of the *elite* (including rich corporations) are able to “buy” politicians—either directly or through lobbyists they hire—for the purpose of writing legislation that favors

them—that enables them to engage in criminal activity that is, however, legal. The repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act (referred to above) is an example of this.

- One's *situation* in the economy may be such as to expose one to various threats. Especially if one is placed in a “low” position in the economy one may be at risk for unemployment, for severance, for low pay (and low-quality benefits), for exposure to hazards (chemical, accident, etc.), etc.
- The very *way of life* (a higher-level “situation”) that one has forces one to be a polluter—in that everything that one *consumes* involved pollution in its manufacture and transportation, one's “*journey to work*” involves pollution, etc. The significant pollution for which one bears responsibility—by simply living in the society—is that of CO₂ emissions, which are resulting in “[global warming](#).” And *that*, is an extremely important matter!

In principle, our existing moral code could be altered to address the first two problems—and, in fact, laws have long been in existence to control the actions of private organizations such as corporations (a type of “individual,” so it is claimed!). But our society has become so inegalitarian that there is no reason to believe that *more* laws will be passed to control the behavior of private organizations; nor is there any chance that laws will be passed to “rein in” the elite. Our *moral code* could be altered to decry reckless activity by private organizations, lobbying, etc., but what good would this do? Without such an altered code being given “teeth”—i.e., *laws* that would outlaw certain behaviors—there is no chance that that altered code would be followed.

Insofar as *situation* is a problem, the source of *that* problem is the *structure* of the society itself—for it is “situations” that *comprise* that structure. Given this, the only solution to this problem is to change the structure—which is not easily accomplished (to make an understatement!).

The same can be said regarding *way of life*. For *how* does one change our way of life?! The simple answer is: *We can't*. *That* fact implies that we are doomed (see the Bill McKibben article linked to “global warming” above).

But *are* we, in fact? I, for one, believe that there is some reason for hope—for those who recognize the threat posed by global warming, and realize that if they engage in *adaptive* activities, they *may* be able to survive the changes that will inevitably be occurring. And, if, in doing so, they create a society that is relatively egalitarian, and has institutions that ensure (so far as is possible) that it *remains* that way, the “situational” problem discussed above can be solved as well.

Even if some engage in this course of action, it seems clear that the next few decades will see tremendous deterioration and a severe loss of human life (and loss of many species).

Unfortunately, these losses cannot be avoided. Those who *do* engage in adaptive activities will have no guarantee that *they* will survive—either because of global warming itself, or because of violence against them instigated by those who have *not* engaged in adaptive activities. But despite this possibility, they should engage in adaptive activities anyway, with the hope that they *will* survive—and will also be able to save at least some of those who failed to engage in adaptive activities.

[August 6, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/08/06/pdf-a-tale-of-two-hypothetical-societies/>]

A Tale of Two (Hypothetical) Societies

Alton C. Thompson

[**Note:** To avoid awkwardness of expression, the male form of words is used below—but should be understood as referring to both sexes.]

A given society can be depicted graphically as an “[input/output](#)” table—such as is done below (input-output analysis was developed primarily by [Wassily Leontieff](#) [1906 – 1999]; it was developed as a tool for studying, and making policy recommendations for, national economies):

		Society X							
		Receiving							
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Doing	A		N	T	T	N	T	N	T
	B	N		T	N	N	T	T	N
	C	N	T		T	N	N	T	T
	D	N	N	T		N	T	T	N
	E	N	T	N	T		T	N	T
	F	N	N	T	T	N		T	N
	G	N	T	T	T	N	N		T
	H	N	N	T	N	T	T	N	

The letters A – H here represent individual members of Society X, with the “Ts” meaning “doing to” and the “Ns” meaning “neither doing to nor receiving from.” (I recognize that corporations are individuals from a *legal* standpoint, and that the *behavior* of corporations—and other organizations (such as governmental units)—is important—in both positive and negative terms—for a society’s members. In this essay my focus, however, is just on *human* individuals.)

Reading across a given *row*, e.g., Row A, for example, the figure indicates (by the “Ts”

present) that for some given period of time Person A did certain things *to* Persons C, D, F, and H, but did nothing to Persons B and G—and, by implication, did nothing *for* anyone. One reason why Person A might *not* have done something to *everyone* is that he knows only *some* of the society’s members, and of them has done something to just a portion of that group. Note that the “Ts”—as is also the case for the “Fs” referred to below—are of a *non-quantitative* nature; thus, although Person D, e.g., might have done more to person G than to Person C, that possibility is of no interest for the purposes of the present discussion.

(The **red** cells indicate that a given person *does* nothing *to* himself, nor does he *receive* anything *from* himself. Also note that just as “doing *to*” has *negative* connotations, “doing *for*” has *positive* ones.)

The above figure indicates that individuals *vary* in the number of individuals *to which* they have done something: A – 4, B – 3, C – 4, D – 3, E – 4, F – 3, G – 4, and H – 3. Such an assumption has a degree of realism.

Also—reading down the *columns* now—the number of individuals who have had something *done to* them varies: A – 0, B – 3, C – 6, D – 5, E – 1, F – 5, G – 4, and H – 4. One can assume that Person A occupies a “higher” position in the society than does, e.g., Person C (who is “stomped on” by almost everyone!).

A very different sort of society is represented graphically below, and labeled Society Y:

		Society Y							
		Receiving							
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Doing	A		N	F	F	N	F	N	F
	B	N		F	N	N	F	F	N
	C	N	F		F	N	N	F	F
	D	N	N	F		N	F	F	N
	E	N	F	N	F		F	N	F
	F	N	N	F	F	N		F	N
	G	N	F	F	F	N	N		F
	H	N	N	F	N	F	F	N	

In this case all of the “Ts” have been replaced with “Fs”—meaning that no one now has anything *done* to him during the given time period but, rather, that those who in Society X had something done to them now have something done *for* them.

Any real-world society would, of course, be somewhere between these two extremes (although neither is as extreme as it conceivably *could be*). Thus, one might think of these two societal types as representing the ends (or near ends) of a continuum; and if we were able to determine a descriptive number for each society

in the world in terms of this continuum, and we were to represent the continuum itself as a line, we could place each society, as a point, on this line.

Were we able to do this (the data don’t exist that would allow us to), we likely would find that most of the world’s societies would cluster on the “X” end of the continuum. What explanation might we supply for this placement?

One possible argument is that humans are, “by nature,” aggressive and selfish, for like all other species, we humans are a product of (what [Charles Darwin](#) [1809 – 1882] termed) “natural selection”—a process “generated” by the fact of excess births with a given group, which excess results in intra-specific competition; the winners of that competition being those individuals who are the most aggressive and selfish—so that their progeny tend to be born with those traits. But given that excess births is a constant, these traits become *intensified* over time.

Darwin's concept of "natural selection" (which *does* warrant the label "concept," but *not* "theory") was based on (a) supposition and (b) reasoning rather than empirical findings. Given that serious deficiency, geographer—and Prince—[Peter Kropotkin](#) [1842 – 1921] wrote a series of articles between 1890 - 1896 (published in 1902 in book form as *Mutual Aid*) that questioned Darwin's emphasis on intra-specific competition. (The articles—which appeared in the periodical *The Nineteenth Century*—were specifically written in response to [Thomas H. Huxley's](#) [1825 – 1895] "The Struggle for Existence in Human Society," which appeared in *The Nineteenth Century* in the February 1888 issue.) Kropotkin—who had done extensive field work in Siberia—noted that he had observed *cooperative* behavior ("mutual aid") in his research, but not the nature "[red in tooth and claw](#)" (as Alfred, Lord [Tennyson](#) [1809 - 1892] put it) of Darwinian "natural selection." (For more on Darwin see my [Ring the Bell for Darwin](#), 2012. Also see Robert Augros and George Stanciu, [The New Biology: Discovering the Wisdom in Nature](#) (1988)

Darwin's name has become a household word, as has "natural selection" to a degree, but Kropotkin is a virtual unknown. Why is that? My best guess is that Darwin's "natural selection" not only *reflected* Victorian *society*, but was "in tune" with Victorian *thought*—illustrating the fact that what is *accepted* as scientific truth may, at times, have more to do with the *societal situation* than with verifiable facts. In addition, it seems that *arguments* have more appeal to most people than do empirical facts: For some reason the elegance of an argument seems to have more impact on people's thinking than do bare facts—even though the premises of the argument may be invented, rather than actual, facts.

If an "X" type of society cannot be attributed to "human nature," how *does* one explain its existence? What I find to be the most plausible explanation (but one which, by its very nature, is difficult to establish definitively) is *The Discrepancy* (see Chapter 2 of my [eBook](#)). The basic idea here is that over a period of thousands of years our ancestors developed a way of life that fit them as humans, but also that their biology developed to fit their way of life—i.e., there was a co-development of the two. However, the development of the human brain was somewhat independent of their way of life, and developed to the point that human thought resulted in innovations that began to *change* the gatherer-hunter way of life into an increasingly sedentary one based on agriculture—there was a "Fall" into agriculture, as Warren Johnson put it in his [Muddling Toward Frugality](#) (1979, p. 43).

Way of life, then, began to change, but human biology tended to change but little—meaning that a "discrepancy" was arising, and growing, between (a) the way of life for which people had become (in effect) "*designed*" by evolutionary processes, and (b) the way of life that they *had* (became forced into). This meant that humans became exposed to stimuli for which their bodies were not designed, were forced to engage in behaviors for which their bodies were not designed, and forced to use their brains in ways for which they were not designed.

Those developments were, in themselves, problems, but also led to changes in *societal systems*—in two respects, in particular. First, humans had become used to (one might even say that they had become *designed for*) life in small groups—but as the Agricultural Revolution proceeded, were forced to live in ever larger societies. Second, humans had become used to (one might even say that they had become *designed for*) interacting with others—especially others in the same group—in a *cooperative* manner, suggesting that societies had not only been small, but egalitarian; increasingly, however, did differentiation begin to occur in the societies that were emerging, with classes/castes forming. *That* fact implies not only that societies were becoming ever more *inegalitarian*, but that some members of the society were *exploiting* other members of the society. Using the language of the Society X input-output table, some members of the society were now “doing to” other members of the society.

The societies that had existed earlier tended toward the Society Y end of the continuum, but over time societies—as they “developed”—moved ever more in the direction of the other end of the continuum. Note that while this process was occurring, human biology was basically a “constant”—i.e., was not changing. However, the *nature of the society* was changing, and it was *that* fact (complex in its *particulars*, admittedly) that was causing the societal differentiation and the emergence of “doing to” behavior.

This fact is important to note because it suggests that it is not inevitable that societies be near the Society X end of the continuum. There is hope that we could be living in societies close to the Society Y end of the continuum—societies within which the “commands” of [Matthew 25](#) are followed as a matter of course. (The [Greater Good Science Center](#) at the University of California, Berkeley, is providing us with solid research findings relative to our innate “goodness” as humans; a reader of my “[Rhombney: Mormonism or Americanism](#)” might wonder why the U. S. government—or members of the Tea Party—has (have) not recognized the *subversive* thrust of this group, and declared its members to be communists, or worse!)

That possibility does not mean, however, that it would be easy to “convert” any *existing* society into one that was near the Society Y end of the continuum—for the dominant forces in existing societies (with the possible exception of [Bhutan](#)) are not interested in societal change in such a direction. This means that if, e.g., we Americans are to live in a “Y” type of society, we will need to create one *within the shell* of the existing (rotten) society.

Not only would it be *desirable* to begin doing so; there is a real *urgency* as well—as I argue in my “[McKibben on Our Uncertain Future](#).” Bill McKibben’s recent article (which I summarize and comment upon in my essay) presents the urgency of the global warming threat as well as anyone has done, and we must be grateful to Bill for having written this article. The point now is to *act* on the matter. Unlike Bill, though, I am convinced that this can only be meaningfully

done by working to create a New Society within the existing one—and would add that in doing so, we try to create a society that is as close to the Society Y end of the continuum as possible.

Going to Church is a Sin

Alton C. Thompson

But not the *only* sin, of course. And although going to church—in the United States, at least—is *usually* a sin, it is not one for *all* attendees: Those who travel to church as pedestrians or by bicycle are not *thereby* sinners—although they may be guilty of *other* sins. But wait! Even those who travel to church as pedestrians or by bicycle commit a sin by their attendance at church. Let me explain:

Of the possible sins that I *might* be referring to here, my focus is solely on the sin of emitting “greenhouse” gases (such as carbon dioxide, CO₂) into the atmosphere. Given that the amount of these gases in the atmosphere for which *any* of us is responsible is miniscule, and we can’t readily perceive the *consequences* of emitting these gases into the atmosphere, it is difficult for *anyone* to perceive oneself as a sinner in being an emitter. Indeed, few are even *conscious* of being emitters, in part because one can not only be *directly* responsible for emissions, but be *indirectly* so responsible as well—with the latter entering the consciousness of but few people.

If one is responsible for being an emitter, but is not aware of the fact that one’s emissions are a problem—and are not even aware of the fact that one *is* an emitter—how can one perceive oneself as a sinner? The answer, of course, is that one *can’t*. Which fact, however, does not prevent one from *being* a sinner. And if one has no *consciousness* that some of one’s behaviors—such as going to church—involve emitting (whether directly or indirectly) greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, and thereby sinning, one lacks a basis for *changing* one’s behavior—and therefore is unlikely to do so.

If people are to reduce, if not eliminate, their emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, they must first recognize what activities result—indirectly as well as directly—in such emissions. In brief, here are the main categories:

- The *transportation* of raw materials to places of production.
- The manufacture of the *equipment* used for the extraction of those raw materials.
- The manufacture of the *vehicles* used for transporting the raw materials.

- The *process of production*—whether the product being manufactured is a “producer” good or a “consumer” good. This includes the emissions associated with the processes involved in heating/cooling the buildings that house the production processes.
- The “*journey to work*” of the employees of a given manufacturing firm (and the manufacture of the vehicles used for that purpose).
- The building and operation of *facilities* that sell fuel to people for the purpose of operating their vehicles—the transportation of the fuel to the facility site itself involving emissions, of course.
- The building of the *buildings* housing the various operations of a manufacturing firm—the building and operation of the equipment, the manufacture and transportation of the material used, the “journey to work” of the builders, etc.
- The building of buildings created for the purpose of retail, wholesale, and “service” activities.
- The “journey to work” of the employees associated with those activities.
- The heating and cooling of any building—whether for manufacturing, commercial, service activity, or residential use.
- Consumption—in that the products that one is consuming involved pollution during the course of their production process, and the consumption of services usually involves travel to a service establishment (and the performance of services itself involves the use of products whose manufacture involved pollution during the course of the production process). All of us are consumers, and thus have both direct and (especially) indirect responsibility for pollution.
- Leisure traveling—whether by automobile, bus, train, or airplane—the operation any of these (to say nothing of the manufacture of the vehicles themselves) involves pollution.
- Etc.

Virtually *everyone* living in an “advanced” country is responsible for some pollution, for our *way of life* is such that virtually everyone is required to engage in some travel that involves pollution, and is required to purchase products and services that involve pollution. Despite that fact, the individuals in an “advanced” country vary in the *degree* of their “pollution contribution.” No

data exist to *demonstrate* this fact, however, which leads one to ask: Is there a variable for which data exist that can be regarded as a *surrogate* for “pollution responsibility”? And I would answer: Yes, *income* data. For we would expect a strong positive correlation between income and pollution contribution because:

- The higher one’s income, the more does one tend to *purchase*.
- The higher one’s income, the more does one tend to *travel*.
- The higher one’s income, the more does one tend to *invest*—thereby being responsible for more production for that reason alone.

However, given that even that person who “contributes,” directly and indirectly, the *most* carbon dioxide to the atmosphere during some given period of time does so to such a small degree relatively (in effect, “contributes” an amount so small as to be practically unmeasurable), there is little point in making much of this variation. There *is*, though, irony in the fact that the *mythology* of our society states that the higher one’s income, the more *important* one is as a member of the society in terms of one’s contribution to the society’s “health” (Mitt Rhombney certainly seems to think so!), but when the matter of pollution is brought into the picture, we have a *reversal* of this relationship!

To say that it is a sin to attend church, is to recognize that *traveling* to church usually involves some pollution “contribution”—because it is usually accomplished by driving a vehicle. If one travels to church as a pedestrian, one avoids such “contribution,” but if one uses a bicycle, its manufacture and sale involved pollution (as the above discussion suggests). But even if one *walks* to church, one becomes a pollution contributor in doing so—for the building of the building involved pollution, as does the heating/cooling of that building—and one must share a part of the responsibility for that pollution.

An important distinction that can be made regarding behaviors is that some are (virtually) *necessary*, some are *discretionary*. *That* fact means that some behaviors can be more readily changed than others—i.e., behaviors that are discretionary can most readily be changed in that they can be *reduced* in their number and frequency, and even *stopped*.

For example, one must continue to work (if one has a job!), and in traveling to work may be forced to drive an automobile—and thereby directly “contribute” greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. Even if one uses public transit, and argues that it will “run” whether or not one uses it, the fact that one *does* use it means that *when* one does, one is partly responsible for the pollution emitted by the transit vehicle.

On the other hand, many of one's activities are more definitely *discretionary*: One does not *need* to attend baseball games, go to concerts, participate in the nightclub scene, take vacations—or go to church. One *could* “cut out” such activities, thereby reducing one's pollution “contribution,” and thereby reduce the total amount of emissions for, e.g., a year.

The problem is that even if all members of our society ceased all of those discretionary activities that involved—indirectly as well as directly—pollution, it is now too late to prevent catastrophic change in our society. (See, e.g., my “[McKibben on Our Uncertain Future](#)” essay.) Thus, terminating one's church attendance would do *nothing* to prevent that catastrophe.

On the other hand, *merely* continuing one's church attendance poses a threat to oneself and one's family. For if one does not also engage in *adaptive* activities, one will reduce the chances that one will be able to survive the changes—attributable to global warming—that will be inevitably occurring.

Ironically, however, given that the adaptive activities that one might engage in could very well involve *moving* to a different location—one where no churches are nearby—one may be *forced* to cease one's church attendance. If one finds such an option not to one's liking, one can always, though, create *one's own* church!

[August 9, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/08/09/reflections-on-the-recent-sikh-killings/>]

Reflections on the Recent Sikh Killings

Alton C. Thompson

On Sunday, August 5, my wife, younger daughter, and I had been in the Green Bay (Wisconsin) area with our son and his family, at an amusement park. On our trip home I was involved in a collision (my automobile was “rear-ended,” but there were no injuries); thus, when I got home, it was that accident which I had on my mind—because I would have to take Monday (two days ago) off work to have an estimate of damage made, etc. When I turned the television on after arriving home, however, I was immediately hit with the news of the killings that had occurred that morning at the Sikh Temple in nearby Oak Creek (5.4 miles from where I live).

I quickly realized then that my problems were utterly trivial in comparison to those faced the family members and friends of those killed—to say nothing of Sikhs in general in the United States: Since “911” there have been [several hundred hate crimes](#) committed against Sikhs in this country—the significance of the September 11 (2001) date being that Moslem individuals were the alleged perpetrators of the [events](#) of that day, and Sikhs are often mistaken for Moslems. (I should add that many still [question](#) the official version of the events surrounding 911—with some arguing that it was a “[false flag](#)” operation conducted, e.g., by the Israeli Mossad.)

Yesterday, in reading Rinku Sen’s [article](#) on the Oak Creek matter, I found these recommendations:

There are things we need to do.

We must limit gun access. Gun proponents recite “guns don’t kill people, people kill people” as fluently as immigration opponents cry out “illegal means illegal.” Gary Younge pointed out on July 20, after Aurora, that it’s never a good time to talk about gun control in this country, and people are dying while we refuse to act. That has to change.

Americans need a real education about the world. If our public schools aren’t going to provide it, then it needs to take place on TV, in churches, in the newspaper.

We need to make sure that the mental health system is well funded and progressive enough to provide support wherever it is needed.

I have no real quarrel with Ms. Sen’s recommendations, but would argue that we should try to be more “radical” in our thinking about problems—by which I mean that we should try to discover the *root causes* of problems such as these hate crimes that have been committed against Sikhs.

And although I believe that one could actually go back 10,000 years, to the Agricultural Revolution for an explanation, in this essay I will argue that we can realistically go back a century or so, to when the United States began flexing its imperialistic muscles.

On William Blum's [web site](#) we find the following:

invasions ... bombings ... overthrowing governments ... occupations ... suppressing movements for social change ... assassinating political leaders ... perverting elections ... manipulating labor unions ... manufacturing "news" ... economic and political sanctions ... death squads ... torture ... biological warfare ... depleted uranium ... drug trafficking ... mercenaries ...

It's not a pretty picture.

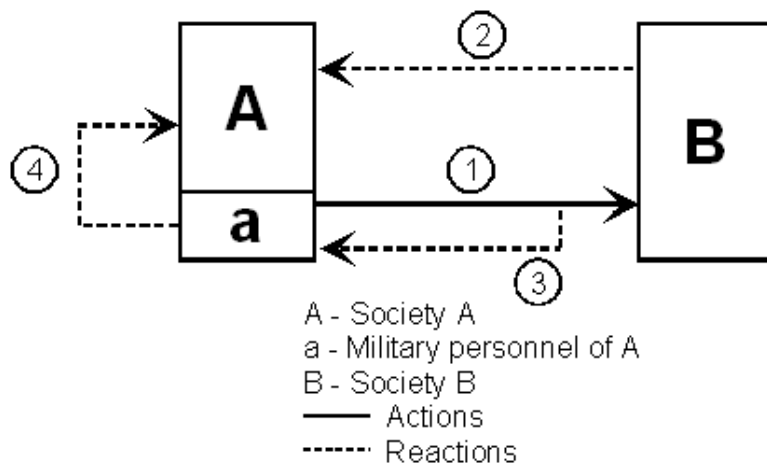
It is enough to give imperialism a bad name.

Blum is the author of [Killing Hope: U. S. Military and C.I.A. Interventions Since World War II](#)—first published in the mid 1980s, with the current edition being an update through 2003. This book provides a no-holds-barred discussion of American foreign policy, with too much truth-telling in it for it to be a source for newspaper or television background stories. (The title of his [Rogue State A Guide to the World's Only Superpower](#). (2000) also provides a frank view of Blum's assessment of the thrust of American foreign policy.) Americans are led to believe, by the news media to which they are exposed, that they are living in a country with high ideals that does only good throughout the world. Blum is one of those clear-eyed authors who knows that the truth is rather different, and feels an obligation to inform people to that effect. For that reason, I have tremendous respect and admiration for the man.

What motivated the perpetrator of the recent hate crime in Oak Creek—Colorado-born [Wade Michael Page](#)—is not clearly known at present. His mother has been quoted as saying that Wade had a happy childhood, so that she simply cannot explain why her son committed the dastardly acts that he did. A local Psychology professor (at Marquette University) has [offered](#) some explanatory comments on the matter, but the fact remains that not enough is known yet about Page to make any *definitive* conclusions as to Page's motivations.

However, below I offer a tentative explanation, based on the information currently available about Page. Please note that I am not offering here a *general* explanation for hate crimes, just one applicable to Page's case—and I emphasize that the explanation is necessarily of a tentative nature. As will become clear as I offer the explanation, it is one that reflects the perspective offered by William Blum in his books and in his monthly reports—the latter available online to those who request to be put on his mailing list. (Usually these reports arrive in one's in-mail box at the beginning of the month, but the report for August has not been sent out as of today, August 8, 2012).

I express my explanation graphically below. The figure contains the numbers 1 – 4, thus it will be convenient to discuss the figure by referring to those numbers. Note that the box on the left has an “A” and an “a” portion. The “A” represents a society—the United States specifically—with particular reference to its political leaders (President and Members of Congress), those individuals typically making decisions under pressure from lobbyists. The other box is labeled “B” and represents some other country. The lower-case “a” in the first box represents military personnel—i.e., those individuals who actually carry out the orders given to them, ultimately, by the country’s political leaders. The solid line represents “actions” and the dashed line “reactions.” As the discussion indicates (but not the figure *per se*), I recognize *primary* and *secondary* reactions.



1. The solid line identified with this number represents *actions* carried out by U. S. military personnel against some other country—such as [Iraq](#). U. S. leaders had decided to initiate military actions, and members of the armed forces then carried out their decision.

2. This line represents *reactions*—particularly of a physical nature—by individuals in Country B to the aggression

being perpetrated against their country. The reactions may be of an “official” nature, but need not be. The name commonly given to such reactions is “[blowback](#),” regarding which the late [Chalmers Johnson](#) [1931 – 2010] has written rather extensively. (The events of 911 are thought of by some as constituting blowback, but the fact that most of those individuals known to be involved were Saudis—i.e., were from a “friendly” country—makes this explanation lacking in plausibility.)

3. Line 3 is also one that represents *reactions*, but in this case reactions on the part of U. S. military personnel to the activities that *they* are perpetrating against Country B. In the case of Wade Michael Page, it is known that he had “served” in the U. S. Army, had been demoted, and perhaps forced out of the military. From information released so far about Page, it is clear that he was a disturbed man—with the strong possibility that his military experience in Iraq (the nature of which little is known as of yet) was the root cause of his mental problems.

4. Whatever the *cause* of those mental problems, it is clear that he *had* problems, and *that* fact in conjunction with other factors (not known as of yet) may have caused him to develop a hatred of Moslems. When he moved to Wisconsin about a year ago, he may have chosen to move to that location because of a knowledge of a Sikh community in the Milwaukee area, thinking of Sikhs as a variety of Moslems. If he was *not* aware of a Sikh presence in the Milwaukee area prior to his move to the Milwaukee area, it is clear that *after* making the move, he *did* become aware of the Sikh presence. Given that the residence that he chose was near the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, the pro-Nazi attitudes that he had developed, and expressed in his singing, found a ready target in the Sikh Temple. Note that I regard *those* actions as reactions, but of a *secondary* nature—in that they stemmed from reactions that he had had earlier to his experience in Iraq.

The above explanation is, of course, of a highly speculative nature, but *does* have, I believe, a high degree of plausibility. My main purpose in making the argument is that I believe that too often when we look for causes, we look for *direct* causes and fail to ask about the background *behind* those direct causes. As a consequence, the solutions that we offer for the problem at hand—such as gun control in this case—mask the more fundamental cause. It's true that gun control in some form (such as outlawing assault rifles) might help in reducing killings, but gun control does not get at the root cause of the problem.

If, as I have argued here, that the *fundamental* problem behind the Page massacre—and perhaps many other problems as well—is *U. S. foreign policy*, one has every reason to conclude that many of our problems will *never* get solved. Why not? Because there is no *international* government that is able to control the actions of “rogue” (per Blum) nations such as the United States! (For a related article, see [this](#).)

[August 10, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/08/10/scumbags-and-intellectual-prostitutes/>]

Scumbags and (Intellectual) Prostitutes

Alton C. Thompson

Bill McKibben's recent *Rolling Stone* article, "[Global Warming's Terrible New Math](#)," should give anyone—whether an American or a citizen of any other country—pause. Among the many scary statements he makes are these:

- Most climate scientists believe that a 2° C. increase in the global mean is the upper limit of safety—i.e., that that is the likely “tipping point,” so that if that point is reached, further warming will occur at an increasing rate.
- Some scientists would place the “safe” temperature (of increase) at **1° C.**
- The increase that has resulted from human activity so far has been about 0.8° C.
- Were humans to cease emitting “greenhouse gases” into the atmosphere tomorrow, because the gases already present would remain in the atmosphere for centuries to come (diminishing in concentration only gradually), those gases would continue to have an effect—and would, in fact, result in a further increase in the global mean temperature of 0.8° C., according to the best computer models in existence at present.
- Thus, even under this “best case” scenario, it is *inevitable* that we will cross the 1° C. threshold.
- If, rather, the 2° C. threshold is the relevant one, it is “merely” *highly likely* that we will cross it—highly likely because the prospect of a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in the near future is extremely dim.

The *reason* we are likely to cross the 2° C. threshold is that the firms currently involved in producing energy from fossil fuels are displaying little interest in ceasing that production. McKibben, therefore, states this about the industry: “It has become a rogue industry, reckless like no other force on Earth. It is Public Enemy Number One to the survival of our planetary civilization.”

We are living during an extremely serious time in human history, and the prospect ahead is for serious problems to arise as global warming “picks up steam”—there even being the possibility that it will “wipe out” 90% of humans before the end of the century, perhaps even result in our demise as a species! Yet, despite the dim prospects ahead, fossil fuel firm executives and

investors seem to think that they will be exempt from the chaos that lies in our future—and in doing so demonstrate that they care not a whit for us “ordinary” folk. Bill McKibben therefore had excellent reasons for declaring the industry “Public Enemy Number One.”

If we can’t look to the executives of fossil fuel firms for “salvation,” can we (we *Americans*, that is), then, look to Congress or the Executive branch for leadership? A recent report issued by the [Sierra Club](#) (founded in 1892 by Wisconsin-raised [John Muir](#) [1838 – 1914]) entitled “[Clean Energy Under Siege](#)” gives one little reason for hope.

In the report’s Executive Summary we find the following statements:

Clean energy is under siege at the congressional level

- Political attacks continue to be waged through the Solyndra investigations.
- Hostile legislation such as the Pompeo bill (H.R.3308) continues to be introduced.
- Conservative think tanks publish “studies” attacking federal appliance efficiency standards.
- The Production Tax Credit (PTC) is stalled in Congress.

Clean energy is under siege at the state level

- Oil, coal, and gas industry power concentrated in the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) is targeting state Renewable Portfolio Standards.
- Well-funded fossil-fuel advocacy groups masquerade as think tanks.
- Self-anointed experts like John Droz Jr. are committed to bringing down clean energy.
- Local groups receive outside funding to pursue an anti-wind agenda.

Clean energy is under siege by some of the most powerful, free-spending entities in the nation

- According to the campaign finance tracking group Open Secrets, oil and gas was a “top-spending industry in 2011” in the policy arena, spending more than \$146 million on lobbying costs.
- Campaign expenditures by Koch family entities Koch Industries and Oxbow Corporation place them in two of the top three campaign spending slots for 2011-2012.
- The oil and gas industries contributed to 387 — or 88 percent — of all members of the House of Representatives in the 2010 election cycle. The industry also contributed to 89 out of 100 senators. In both chambers of Congress combined, Republicans received 86 percent of all oil and gas donations.
- William Koch has bankrolled opposition to the Cape Wind offshore wind project for more than a decade.
- Exxon has contributed more than \$600,000 since 1998 to the Manhattan Institute, and approximately \$676,500 since 1998 to the Heartland Institute.

To summarize the situation briefly:

- The industry spends millions of dollars each year in promoting their products—on the basis that their development will create jobs and give our country energy self-sufficiency. People are willing to prostitute themselves—compromise whatever integrity they might have—advertising for the energy companies for the sake of making a living for *themselves*—with total disregard for the welfare of our *species*.
- It funds “think tanks” to produce literature to “disprove” global warming and promote the virtues of its products. Those “scientists” who work for such organizations are somehow able to justify being intellectual prostitutes. Some such “scientists” *may* be sincere skeptics—for there *are* such people, one would like to think (people who are *sincere*, that is)—but one would assume that virtually *all* of them are aware of the research of mainstream scientists, and recognize the merits of that research.
- It spends millions on lobbyists—and on politicians directly—in an effort to control how politicians vote. It is sickening to learn that:

The oil and gas industries contributed to 387—or 88 percent—of all members of the House of Representatives in the 2010 election cycle. The industry also contributed to 89 out of 100 senators. In both chambers of Congress combined, Republicans received 86 percent of all oil and gas donations.

Our Representatives in the House of Representatives and our Senators are supposed to represent the *people* in their districts, not *moneyed interests*. However, most of the individuals in those two chambers are willing to receive large sums from energy-producing firms, and in doing so prostitute themselves—and our political system as well. Given, then, that we can expect little if any action, relative to global warming, from our *political* leaders, *what* are we to do?

My answer is that, first, we need to recognize the extreme seriousness of our current situation—the strong possibility that we will soon cross a critical threshold, and perhaps have *already* done so, in fact. Whether we have or haven’t, we must, second, act as *individuals*—and perhaps also as *private organizations* (such as religious groups)—to begin *adaptive* measures, doing so as soon as possible. If we don’t at least *try* to save ourselves and others, we will reduce our chances of survival—for ourselves and our offspring. Unfortunately, however, even if we do our best to adapt, there are no guarantees that we won’t perish anyway.

I hate to be so pessimistic, but it’s the only stance that strikes me as *reasonable* at present. (:

Paul Ryan and Other Matters

Alton C. Thompson

“Man’s inhumanity to man”—a [phrase](#) attributed to poet [Robert Burns](#) [1759 – 1796]—can take a variety of forms—from slighting others, being annoying, nagging, calling others names, and insults, etc., at one end of the scale, to exploiting, injuring, torturing, and killing, etc., at the other end. And although hurtful behavior is often credited to “human nature”—to, that is, innate behavioral tendencies—the concept of “human nature” *itself* is problematic: Human behavior always occurs in a certain *context*, so that *behavior itself* is always a function of both (a) innate behavioral tendencies and (b) that context.

“Context” is relevant for all forms of life, and has not only *immediate* relevance for all living things, but plays a role in their *evolution*. Given that behavioral tendencies develop in conjunction with physical attributes while evolution is occurring, and the course of evolution for a given species is influenced by the *context* within which it occurs, it is evident that the two factors identified above are *independent* only from a *short-run* perspective; from a *long-run* perspective, in contrast, the two factors are *intertwined*—in that although context affects *how* evolution proceeds, as evolution proceeds with a species, the context *itself* may change, to varying degrees, as members of the species engage in *actions* within that context that *change* it.

With most species, the context within which its members live is just of a *physical* nature. But even the nature of that physical context changes as we move up the evolutionary ladder in that the context provided by *other members of a given species* becomes an increasingly important part of an individual’s context. And with *humans*, there is not only a (a) physical environment context and a (b) societal context, but a (c) *mental* one as well—consisting of concepts, beliefs, philosophies, ideologies, scenarios, “theories,” values, etc. This is not to say that other species *lack* mental lives and lack [languages](#); but most would agree that the mental life of humans is of a different (“higher”) order than that associated with other species.

That fact is typically ignored, however, by journalists in our society in that when they report on hurtful behaviors, they tend to report:

- *Actions* that have been hurtful.
- Actions that have been *directly* hurtful—e.g., one person stabs or shoots another person (the recent massacre of Sikhs in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, being an example).

- Such actions typically being engaged in by lower-class individuals—the hurtful actions of higher-class people tending to be indirect, involving a complex chain of causation, and often being legal also. (The latter is not surprising, given that they occupy a position in the society that enables them to have laws enacted that favor and protect them!) Paul Craig Roberts’s “[The Dispossessed Majority](#)” doesn’t bring out *this* point, but *does* discuss the fact that the average person in this society is increasingly getting “screwed.”

Why journalists limit themselves to such reporting is likely attributable to several factors:

- Given that their job is to report news, and “news” is usually thought of as “events that have just occurred”—those “events” being easily verifiable ones—journalists typically find themselves reporting on shootings, accidents, and the like.
- I would guess that few have the intelligence and education that would enable them to report on the hurtful behaviors engaged in by the “rich and powerful,” given that it is usually *indirect* actions on their part that are hurtful.
- Reporters don’t have the luxury of reporting on what *they* think is important. Reporters are employees, and the firms they work for (a) may be owned by rich individuals, with (b) the firms depending for their existence on advertising dollars rather than subscriptions. Given these facts, if reporters are assigned to work on “in depth” projects, it is highly *unlikely* that they would be asked to [work on projects](#) that might expose the shenanigans of the rich or be embarrassing to advertisers. Recently, here in Milwaukee reporters were assigned the task of determining why so many parking tickets are being issued wrongfully; and although such a project is a worthy one, it is hardly one calculated to disturb the societal *status quo*!

However, the *fact* that reporters rarely report on important matters means that most of the citizenry of our society is poorly informed as to, e.g., what hurtful activities are being engaged in—or being proposed, planned—by the rich and/or our leaders. Although the average person in this society may *sense* that s/he is being screwed by the rich and/or our leaders, s/he rarely encounters clear *confirmation* of that fact. Internet sites such as this one attempt to fit the gap left open by the mainstream media, but few in our society avail themselves of the “news and views” regarding the *workings of our society* provided by internet sources. (Which is *not* to say, of course, that *most* internet sites that provide such “news and views” provide information that has strong *empirical support*—or is consistent with *authentic* religious values.)

My Representative in the House of Representatives is Paul Ryan (about whom an [exposé of sorts](#) was recently published), an individual who has become a major force in the Republican Party. In saying that he is “my” Representative, I need to add that he is my Representative *only* in the sense that he (supposedly) “represents” the people in the district within which I live. Given that I

have never voted for him—and wouldn't even if my life depended on it!—it should be clear that I don't think of Ryan as representing my *views*—but that's another matter.

Ryan, like Mitt Rhombney, was born with a “silver spoon in his mouth,” who “comes across” as being much less of a “phoney” than Rhombney—and for that reason may be chosen by Rhombney as his running mate. Put more plausibly: Rhombney's “*handlers*” may insist that Rhombney choose Ryan for this—and other—reasons, for I'm sure that Rhombney himself does not perceive himself as a “phoney.” But I'm getting “off the track” here—for the point that I wish to make is that Ryan is a person who is “possessed”—by an ideological position:

In 1988, Ryan went to Miami University, in Ohio, where he got to know an economics professor named William R. Hart, a fierce and outspoken libertarian in a faculty dominated by liberals. The two quickly discovered their shared fascination with [Ayn] Rand and [Friedrich] Hayek. Ryan got his first introduction to movement conservatism when Hart handed him an issue of *National Review*. “Take this magazine—I think you'll like it,” he said.

And:

Like many conservatives, he claims to have been profoundly affected by Ayn Rand. After reading “Atlas Shrugged,” he told me [author Ryan Lizza], “I said, ‘Wow, I've got to check out this economics thing.’ What I liked about her novels was their devastating indictment of the fatal conceit of socialism, of too much government.” He dived into Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman.

In a 2005 speech to a group of Rand devotees called the Atlas Society, Ryan said that Rand was required reading for his office staff and interns. “The reason I got involved in public service, by and large, if I had to credit one thinker, one person, it would be Ayn Rand,” he told the group. “The fight we are in here, make no mistake about it, is a fight of individualism versus collectivism.” To me [author Ryan Lizza] he was careful to point out that he rejects Rand's atheism.

[Ayn Rand](#) [1905 – 1982] was a promoter of “[Objectivism](#)”:

Objectivism's central tenets are that reality exists independent of [consciousness](#), that human beings have direct contact with reality through sense perception, that one can attain objective knowledge from perception through the process of [concept](#) formation and [inductive logic](#), that the proper [moral](#) purpose of one's life is the pursuit of one's own [happiness](#) (or [rational self-interest](#)), that the only [social system](#) consistent with this morality is full respect for [individual rights](#) embodied in [laissez faire capitalism](#), and that the role of [art](#) in human life is to transform humans' [metaphysical](#) ideas by selective reproduction of reality into a physical form—a work of art—that one can comprehend and to which one can respond emotionally.

The *laissez-faire* concept is a *proposal*—a proposal of the form: *If such and such is true, it follows that such and such will also be true.* And the basic idea underlying *laissez-faire* thinking is that an “invisible hand” operates in the real world *under certain conditions*:

The part of [Adam Smith’s] *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) which describes what future generations would consider to be Smith’s invisible hand, ironically, does not use the term. The process by which market competition channels individual greed is most clearly described in Book I, Chapter 7.

Adam Smith uses the metaphor in Book IV, chapter II, paragraph IX of *The Wealth of Nations*. In the often misquoted and poorly understood paragraph quoted below Smith argues that a preference for the use of “domestic” industry over “foreign” industry to gain individual profit constitutes an “invisible” and benevolent hand which promotes the interests of the nation and society at large while at the same time enriching the individual. The individual may have a selfish motive but the use of domestic industry and labor enriches and promotes the interests of society as a whole.

By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an **invisible hand** to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was not part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it. ”

Smith may have borrowed the expression from [Shakespeare's Macbeth](#). The expression is used in a dialogue in which Macbeth informs Lady Macbeth of his fears for their safety. Macbeth asks the night to destroy his enemy “with thy bloody and invisible hand” (Act 3, Scene 2).

Note Smith’s use of the word “frequently” in the above quotation from his classic work rather than “always.” Smith was writing in the context of his times, and knew that even in that context the competition involved in “markets” *then* the pursuit of one’s own interests to the exclusion of the interests of others did *not necessarily* always promote the “public good.” And if Smith were alive now, given that the economies that exist now are very different from what existed in his day (in, e.g., being characterized by domination by a few large firms in any given industry), it is highly unlikely that Smith’s views on the economy would be the same as they were in the late 1700s—a fact that Paul Ryan and his ilk seem incapable of recognizing.

Andrew Sayer [notes](#) that:

The myth [that Smith “saw people as wholly self-interested”) is based on an extraordinarily selective reading of just a few short passages from *The Wealth of Nations* regarding the invisible hand and motivation in market exchange, taken out of context. Some versions of the myth acknowledge that before *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) but assume that the latter’s deep analysis of moral sentiments, which include but go beyond self-interest, was abandoned for a concept of motivation based on narrow self interest. However, the main arguments of *The Wealth of Nations* were included in Smith’s lectures even before *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was published, and the latter was not only his first book, but his last, the final revised (sixth) edition being published in 1790, a year after the final (fifth) edition of *The Wealth of Nations*. It is inconceivable that Smith could have regarded them as incompatible, and indeed there is now a large literature arguing that they are compatible, so that there was, in effect, only one Adam Smith, and that he bears little resemblance to the caricature recycled by [Julian] Edney [Sayer’s essay comments on an earlier one by Edney].

Why people such as Paul Ryan are attracted to *laissez-faire* thinking (and Ayn Rand’s “Objectivism”) is a question difficult to answer. Ryan Lizz’s “*exposé*” cited earlier notes that in the summer of 1986:

Paul answered a frantic phone call from his father’s secretary. “Your dad’s got clients in here,” she said. “Where is he?” Paul walked into his parents’ bedroom and thought his father was sleeping. “I went to wake him up,” he told me, “and he was dead.”

“It was just a big punch in the gut,” Ryan said. “I concluded I’ve got to either sink or swim in life.” His mother went back to school, in Madison, and studied interior design; his grandmother, who suffered from Alzheimer’s, moved into their home, and Ryan helped care for her. “I grew up really fast,” he said.

And:

His father’s death . . . provoked the kind of existential soul-searching that most kids don’t undertake until college. “I was, like, ‘What is the meaning?’ ” he said. “I just did lots of reading, lots of introspection. I read everything I could get my hands on.” Like many conservatives, he claims to have been profoundly affected by Ayn Rand. After reading “Atlas Shrugged,” he told me, “I said, ‘Wow, I’ve got to check out this economics thing.’ What I liked about her novels was their devastating indictment of the fatal conceit of socialism, of too much government.” He dived into Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman.

Given that Ryan is a (nominal) Roman Catholic, one might have expected him to seek counsel from his priest—and might have expected, on the other hand, that *his priest* would have tried to help Paul cope with his father’s death. But if the priest did this (I have no information on the matter), it obviously had little impact on him—and he turned, instead, to highly individualistic works such as those by the authors identified above—with the Christian Bible not being among those works. Perhaps the fact that Ryan came from a wealthy family (“Three families, the Ryans, the Fitzgeralds, and the Cullens, sometimes called the Irish Mafia, helped develop the

town [of Janesville, Wisconsin], especially in the postwar era.”)—and for that reason acquired a mindset appropriate for his position—also helps explain why Ryan turned, for consolation, to the works of (atheist!) Ayn Rand rather than the gospels.

Ryan’s background helps us understand the “Roadmap for America’s Future” which he and two others developed and promoted in 2008:

the Roadmap was a comprehensive plan to reduce the welfare state and radically curtail the government’s role in protecting citizens from life’s misfortunes.

Ryan recommended ending Medicare, the government health-insurance program for retirees, and replacing it with a system of direct payments to seniors, who could then buy private insurance. (The change would not affect current beneficiaries or the next decade of new ones.) He proposed ending Medicaid, the health-care program for the poor, and replacing it with a lump sum for states to use as they saw fit. Ryan also called for an end to the special tax break given to employers who provide insurance; instead, that money would pay for twenty-five-hundred-dollar credits for uninsured taxpayers to buy their own plans. As for Social Security, Ryan modestly scaled back his original proposal by reducing the amount invested in private accounts, from one-half to one-third of payroll taxes. Ryan’s Roadmap also promised to cut other government spending, though it didn’t specify how. Likewise, it promised to lower income-tax rates and simplify the tax code, but it didn’t detail which popular deductions—mortgage interest? retirement contributions?—it would eliminate.

In short, the “Roadmap,” if implemented, would favor the rich in this country even more than they are at present, and would reduce benefits for virtually everyone else. It is not a roadmap that Adam Smith would approve (but Ayn Rand likely would); and it’s difficult to believe that his constituents—in Janesville or elsewhere in his district—would approve. But we live in a crazy world, one in which “[false consciousness](#)” is a far more important phenomenon than in Karl Marx’s day. As Paul Craig Roberts [noted](#) recently,

The bumper sticker on the beat-up pickup truck read: “Friends don’t let friends vote Democrat.”

The driver was obviously not affluent. Yet, despite all the news about mega-trillion dollar bankster bailouts, mega-million dollar bonuses for financial crooks, and unimaginable compensation packages for corporate CEOs who have moved middle class jobs out of America, something made the down-and-out pickup truck driver associate with the political party of the super-rich.

As I wondered at this strange alliance of the dirt poor with the mega-rich, I remembered that in 2004 Thomas Frank wondered about how the Republicans had managed to convince the poor to vote against their best interests. Frank’s answer, or part of his answer, is that the Republicans use “social issues,” such as gay marriage and Janet Jackson’s exposed nipple to work up indignation over the threat to moral values posed by liberal Democrats.

Paul Ryan's constituents don't vote for him because of his positions on "social issues"—which issues don't seem to play any significant role in Ryan's thinking anyway. What's important for Ryan, rather, is "reducing the role of government in our lives" (but not reducing military expenditures, of course!)—but not because doing so would "promote the general welfare" but, rather, because Ryan is an ideologue with a fixation on a certain set of ideas. He is a personable individual who presents himself well—so well, in fact, that his constituents have become blinded to the fact that he serves the interests of the "1%," not theirs. So "possessed" does Ryan seem to be with these ideas that he is simply *unable* to recognize the fact that if they were implemented (Rhombney has stated his approval of the Roadmap), they would be hurtful to many—to the degree that the United States might become another Syria.

I noted at the beginning that we humans live in a (a) physical context, a (b) social one, and a (c) mental one, and have been emphasizing the latter one—especially its ideological component—as a factor that helps account for the "man's inhumanity to man" that exists in our society. It is not the *only* factor, however.

A large society, such as ours, is likely to be hierarchical—which implies that it is divided into social classes, with significant variations in income between the various classes.

"Theoretically," such differences are not important from the standpoint of how people treat each other in the society, but the fact of the matter is that such differences *are* significant—as a [recent article](#) argues. The title of the article: "How Wealth Reduces Compassion: As riches grow, empathy for others seems to decline." In a research study referred to in the article it was, for example,

found that luxury car drivers were more likely to cut off other motorists instead of waiting for their turn at the intersection. This was true for both men and women upper-class drivers, regardless of the time of day or the amount of traffic at the intersection. In a different study they found that luxury car drivers were also more likely to speed past a pedestrian trying to use a crosswalk, even after making eye contact with the pedestrian.

What seems to be the case is that as societies grow in population size, they also become more and more differentiated socially (into social classes), and that as *that* occurs, there is a corresponding separation of people from a *residential* standpoint. *That* fact tends to influence interaction patterns in that one tends to interact primarily with members of one's family and social class (who also tend to be one's near neighbors), and one's interactions with members of other classes (especially ones "lower" than one's own) tend to become more and more perfunctory—and *that* in itself means that one loses whatever empathy one may have had previously for members of other classes. This loss is especially important for those in the "higher" classes, for given that they are the ones who wield power and influence in the society, the fact that that power/influence is combined with a low degree of empathy for those in lower

classes means that they may engage in actions hurtful to others (i.e., others in lower classes)—and *not even be aware that they are doing so*.

What facilitates a loss of feelings of empathy even further is that developments occur in the *mental* realm that help keep the social structure rigid, and even make it more so. On the one hand, members of lower classes may, e.g., come to have a fixation on a supposed afterlife—which fixation helps them cope, but also lessens their interest in bringing about societal change. The same could be said for those who turn to “white extremism”—except that such people may tend to direct their anger at minorities within the society—such as was the case with the recent Sikh massacre in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

On the other hand, members of upper classes may “latch onto” philosophies/ideologies—such as social Darwinism, objectivism, libertarianism, etc.—that help them solidify their position in the society: Because it convinces them that they have The Truth on their side, they are able to proceed—in good conscience—to engage in hurtful actions that *they* do not perceive as hurtful, nor do others (such as Paul Ryan’s constituents, journalists, etc.)

In short, “forces” seem to be at work whose function is to *continue* our society as a hierarchical society—so that it might appear that there is no hope for change. The “good news,” however, is that drastic change will come to our society *whether our elite (and others) want it or not*: As I have noted in many of my previous essays on this site, global warming is likely to result in the collapse of our society (to say nothing of other societies) within a few decades, and knowledge of that (strong) possibility should make us realize that there may be a silver lining in that cloud—as I suggested in my [“Thank You, Deniers!”](#)

What I mean by that is that the imminent collapse of our society provides us with an *opportunity*—to start creating a New Society within the Existing Order. And assuming that in doing so we would want to design it so that hurtful behavior would be minimal, what I have said in this essay, and previous essays, leads me to offer the following “design” ideas:

- Make the community, [rather than the family](#), as the society’s basic unit.
- Ensure that these communities remain small (no more than about 500 residents) so that a hierarchy will be discouraged from arising. With a small community, everyone will be able to interact with all others in the community, which fact should help everyone develop empathy for others—not only those others in the same community, but others in other communities.
- Strive to make any community (at the beginning of the process, at least) as self-sufficient as possible—so that its residents will be *able* (but only *possibly*) to survive when the

Larger Society begins to collapse. (Perhaps “community-sufficient” is more apt than “self-sufficient.”)

- Establish the [Structured Interaction Group](#) (SIG)—or [New Word Fellowship](#) (NeWF)—as a fundamental institution in any given community. Participation in this institutions can have manifold positive benefits.

It’s highly probable that we humans have innate tendencies to be aggressive, hurtful, with this tendency varying in strength from individual to individual. However, the *situation* in which one lives *also* plays an important role in how one behaves. Thus, given that we can’t change our innate behavioral proclivities, but *can* change the situations within which we live, it is foolish not to try to do so. The fact that our society is headed for a “crash” gives us an *opportunity* to do just that.

What Are the Olympics About?

Alton C. Thompson

Performing useless activities well.

August 16, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/08/16/pdf-demystifying-the-concept-of-laissez-faire/>

"Fleshing Out" Laissez-Faire

Alton C. Thompson

"*Laissez-faire*"—or *laissez-nous faire*—literally means "Let us do," [and](#)

According to historical legend, the phrase stems from a meeting in about 1680 between the powerful French [finance](#) minister [Jean-Baptiste Colbert](#) and a group of French businessmen led by a certain M. Le Gendre. When the eager [mercantilist](#) minister asked how the French state could be of service to the merchants and help promote their commerce, Le Gendre replied simply "*Laissez-nous faire*" ("Leave us be", lit. "Let us do").

Since 1680, *laissez-faire* has continued to have an *economic* meaning, in that its focus is on *firms* in the economy, and expresses the valuation that the decision-makers of any given firm should be free to make decisions, relative to their businesses, without interference from governmental units. The *laissez-faire* concept, it should be noted, parallels the concept of [libertarianism](#) in emphasizing freedom from interference in decision-making, but the latter has its focus on *individual* behavior rather than *firm* behavior. Given, however, that business firms are *operated* by human individuals, the distinction between the two concepts is not a hard and fast one.

It should be obvious that to say that the *laissez-faire* directive (for that's what it *is*—rather than being either a philosophy or a theory) is *enlightening* is an overstatement. For *behind* that directive is a series of tacitly-held assumptions, from which certain conclusions purportedly follow logically. That is, *laissez-faire* is not simply a stand-alone directive, but one with a certain *rationale*. Given that fact, one has no reason to *accept* the directive unless one is (a) *aware* of the assumptions that underlie the directive, (b) in *agreement* with those assumptions (some of which may be assertions of fact, others statements of values), and (c) convinced that the conclusions associated with the concept *logically follow* from the assumptions.

If one *rejects* one or more of the assumptions constituting the rationale (on the basis of lacking empirical support, or contrary to the values that one accepts), one will not, of course, be interested in taking that last step—because one's rejection of the concept will have already occurred.

In deciding, then, whether one should accept the *laissez-faire* directive, one must first become *aware* of the rationale that lies behind it, and my initial task here is to identify that rationale: What follows is *one* possible rationale; others may conceive the rationale for the *laissez-faire*

directive somewhat differently. I make here no effort to *defend* the rationale offered below, but *would* argue that the statements of the rationale below do constitute a coherent argument.

The Rationale

1. The rationale for the *laissez-faire* directive tacitly has its basis in a “[Newtonian](#)” view of the world. That is the world is in effect conceived as consisting of *material* (i.e., inanimate) objects, and those objects are only subject to a *physical force*—one analogous to gravity. Strictly speaking, this world contains no living things (!), and not only do no biological processes occur in it, but no chemical ones either.
2. This world does, however, contain people. However, in this world only *individuals* are real. Human super-units—e.g., families, clans, tribes, nations—are mere intellectual fictions, abstractions, constructs.
3. *Societies* exist in this world, but are mere *collections* of individuals (i.e., an atomistic conception of society is assumed). Insofar as a society *is* “real,” it is something created by the individuals who comprise it (“social contract”); as such, it can have no influence on the individuals in it: That is, in this world, “societal influence” is a fiction, an impossibility. However, there is one qualification regarding human super-units: *Government* is real; indeed, because of that fact, it can “interfere” in the realm of human activities—can, in fact, *only* interfere.
4. The individuals that constitute a society are perceived in uni-dimensional (i.e., *reductionistic*) terms—only as actors in the economy (i.e., producers and consumers of goods/services).
5. *Economic activities* (i.e., production, transportation, selling, buying activities) are conducted by household heads (males); “domestic” activities—not recognized as “economic” activities because they involve no remuneration—are engaged in by wives (females) and children. All members of a given household *consume*, of course. Indeed, the only significance of women is that they bear children and are consumers; and the only significance of children is that they are consumers. (What a world!)
6. Household heads are similar in innate abilities. But because each household head acquires certain skills as a specialist, household heads vary in skills. These skills result from practice, however, not genetic inheritance. (Wives, though, because they all perform the same basic set of domestic tasks—preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning, etc.—differ very little one from another.) (What a *boring* world!)

7. Household heads are similar in their *willingness* to work—i.e., there is no variation in degree of industriousness/laziness.
8. Household heads are similar in *motivation*. Each is “driven” by a desire to maintain survival (this requiring the acquisition and consumption of certain goods) and, beyond mere survival, to attain a certain level of (material) comfort—this level of comfort being the *same* for all household heads, and being *attainable* by all. Given that work is tacitly assumed to be irksome (i.e., it involves discomfort), each household head strives to *minimize* the number of work hours (e.g., weekly) required to attain the given “standard of living.”
9. Household heads are either self-employed, or sell their labor to another household head (one who heads a firm); thus, the production units of the economy are not necessarily all one-household units. Given that the buyer and seller of labor bargain on equal terms, no employee is exploited; in [Marxian](#) terms, no employee produces “surplus value” expropriated by the buyer of labor (“capitalist”).
10. The exchange process is “frictionless” in that no time/cost is involved. It’s as if all elements of the economy in question existed at a single point on the earth’s surface! (It’s amazing how theoreticians in most “social science” disciplines are able to assume away—tacitly, at any rate—the existence of *geographical* space, yet are able to recognize the fact of *time*!)

Conclusions From the Above Assumptions:

In a sense, I have introduced a cast of characters (i.e., the assumptions above). If I now bring in the time dimension, and add the assumption that a force analogous to gravity (but referred to as an “[invisible hand](#)” by [Adam Smith](#) [1723 – 1790]) is acting on household heads, a force that we can refer to as the “[market](#)” (and recognize that the workings of that “market” are somewhat mysterious), and I now say “Action!,” what will happen? The following (at least) are the expectations that one should have, given the above assumptions, including the assumption of a “market” (note that the *driver* here is *demand*):

1. The *right goods/services* are produced, given the demand that exists.
2. They are produced in the right *quantities* [1] to satisfy the demand that exists.
3. The number of *specialists* in any given production/service specialty is exactly what’s needed to satisfy the demand that exists.

4. Any given household consumes the same array of goods that it would if it were producing just for its own needs (“prosuming,” to use Alvin Toffler's term [2])—but expends *less time* doing so (a fruit of the “[division of labor](#)” [3]).
5. Given that specialists are able to produce not only quickly, but with skill, any given household is able to consume *higher-quality* goods/services than would be possible under a regime of prosuming (i.e., self-sufficient households).
6. Insofar as the economy contains some production/service units which involve *several* household heads, the economy is able to make available some *kinds* of goods/services whose production would not be *possible* under a regime of prosuming. Everyone is assumed to take advantage of this possibility—so that all households consume a greater *range* of goods/services than they could under a prosuming regime.
7. All households spend the same amount of *time* working, and obtain the same *array* of goods and services.
8. A *meritocracy* exists in the sense that each household receives (in goods/services) what it *deserves* (i.e., receives in proportion to effort expended). In this case, however, there is no *variation* between households in income—that is, there is no social-class hierarchy: Everyone *merits* the same income, and everyone *receives* the same income. Household heads differ in the *industry* with which they are associated; they do not, though, differ in *social class*. A *classless society*, thus, exists—the socialist ideal! (Except, perhaps, for the fact that women are basically a faceless blob in this model: All are domestics, interchangeable ones at that.) (Whoops! I forgot that “society” is a fictional unit!)
9. Because no governmental units exist, no “interference” in the economy occurs by such units.
10. Economic activities involve no pollution because no *chemical* processes occur, only *physical* ones.

This, then, is one perspective on what’s behind the *laissez-faire* directive. The implication here is that an economy *can* be a smooth-operating machine, because a “natural” force is operating that will *ensure* that smoothness of operation. However, that force *can* be “interfered” with—with *government* having that role, and *only* that role. (Other possible sources of interference—such as droughts—are assumed away here.)

Commentary

Thinking about the *laissez-faire* model reminds me of what Robert Augros and George Stanciu said ([*The New Biology*](#), p. 160) about Charles Darwin's "natural selection" model—which also has a Newtonian basis:

All of "Darwin's premises are defective: there is no unlimited population growth in natural populations, no competition between individuals, and no new species producible by selecting for varietal differences. And if Darwin's premises are faulty, then his conclusion [of slow, steady, progressive change] does not follow."

For both are highly flawed—suggesting that the only reason they have been taken seriously is that both have served an ideological function.

As to *specific* comments on *laissez-faire* model, I would say the following:

1. The conclusions seem to follow logically from the assumptions; however the *specific* workings of the "market" have been left somewhat ambiguous in my rendering of the concept. (I'm a typical male!)
2. The conclusions are limited in scope in that they are just of an *economic* nature. What the "model" ignores is that there are many "goods" in addition to those included in the conclusions. I do not question the value of the "goods" that the model *does* produce; what I question, rather, is the limited *scope* of those "goods."
3. The model tacitly assumes—erroneously—that one's well-being is derived *solely* from the consumption of material goods and services. Although it's true that we all need to consume certain items for our survival, once our survival needs are met, our well-being is more dependent on, e.g., the nature of our interactions with others. The model tacitly suggests that one would never "do" for others because doing so would detract from one's own well-being. The fact of the matter, however, is that doing for others can not only contribute to the well-being of the recipients of one's doing, but one's own well-being as well. Thus, the *psychological assumptions* of the model are at significant variance with what is currently known regarding what people need, and need to do, for a high level of well-being.
4. *Ideology* plays an important role in the behavior of many people in the real world: They are "driven" in their behavior by ideology, and the *direction* that they are thereby driven is often at variance with their physical and other needs for well-being—needs "given" to them by evolutionary processes. Paradoxically, people can convince themselves *intellectually* that they are happy, and yet be engaging in activities that are contrary to their "design specifications" as humans.

5. The model, as I have presented it, assumes that people will pursue “sufficiency”: They will strive to obtain a certain level of consumption, and having attained it, cease further consumption; and given that to be *able* to consume, they need to obtain a level of *income* that will enable that level of consumption, they will seek that level of income and no more. Insofar as people in the real world are “possessed” by an ideology of “more,” however (which seems to be common in our society!), their pursuit of income takes on irrational dimensions—the case of Mitt Rhombney being but one example.
6. The model tacitly assumes that the only interest that people have is that of working to make an income that will enable them to survive and live with some degree of comfort. The reality, of course, is that people in the real world vary *greatly* in their interests, and any society warranting the label “civilized” will recognize that fact, and will accommodate those whose principal interests lie outside of “getting and spending.”
7. People vary not only in their interests but in their intelligence, knowledge, skills, etc. One implication of that fact is that the position that one “achieves” in the economy is in part (but *only* in part!) a function of having those personal characteristics that are *relevant* for such achievement.
8. The personal characteristics that one has are not only a function of one’s heredity, but one’s *family situation*. From an economic standpoint, and to use language related to the recent Olympics, youth begin from different starting points: The real-world system is characterized by unfairness, given that some are born into families that have wealth and connections, but many are not so “lucky.”
9. Societies are not mere fictions, they are *real*. Granted that they are not readily observable, but the member (or, as some would say, *inmate*) of a given society will be influenced strongly by her/his society in thinking and behavior. *I* have been as unable to escape the influence of the society that I live in as most people.
10. The tacit assumption that chemical processes do not occur, so that pollution does not occur because it *cannot* occur, is a dangerous assumption: As I have emphasized in many of my previous essays, global warming threatens not only our way of life, but the *lives* of many—perhaps to the degree that it will render our species *extinct*!

Why Bother About Laissez-Faire?!

Given the economic meltdown that we experienced recently in this country, and given that it was precipitated by actions of “out of control” individuals, it is difficult to understand the paradox of why now *laissez-faire* ideas are coming to the fore once again—indicated, e.g., by Rhombney’s selection of Paul Ryan as his running mate. “Objectivist” [Ayn Rand](#) had been an important

figure in Ryan's intellectual development (to the degree that such occurred with him!), and much has been written about that matter recently, including [this](#):

Yet Ryan's strength, we are told, is in his ideas. He does have a few—a rarity in his party these days, where the word “no” tends to be the sum total of all philosophies. “If you're going to criticize, then you should propose,” Ryan told the New Yorker's Ryan Lizza. So while it's true that conservative think tanks, politicians and columnists have seized on Ryan's budget plan with feverish enthusiasm, it's not necessarily because of the brilliance of the plan. It's because it's the only alternative Republicans have managed. It shines by default in a universe of dark matter.

And [this](#):

Here is [Paul Ryan](#) in one [rather long!] sentence: He is an acolyte of Ayn Rand's sinister school of thought that human beings are only worth what they can earn or be sold for in the marketplace, the author of the blueprint Romney used to craft his notorious budget plan to raise taxes on 95% of Americans while cutting taxes for those who share his rarefied financial atmosphere, the latest in a long line of brigands seeking to eviscerate Medicare and make growing old in America the equivalent of growing poor again, a job-killer who wants to do away with Pell Grants in an age when educated workers are becoming harder and harder to find, a family friend of Big Oil, [which explains his virulent hatred for any attempts to safeguard the environment](#), as evidenced by his oft-repeated claims that climate change is a giant conspiracy he says is invalidated whenever snow happens to fall, which explains his vote to overthrow the EPA's ability to regulate greenhouse gas pollution, his vote to block the USDA from preparing for climate change, and his vote to kill higher light bulb efficiency standards for reasons passing understanding, and let's not forget that he was a member of that very very very special cadre of House Republicans who signed a bill to make fertilized eggs into people so as to outlaw abortion, in vitro fertilization and many forms of birth control.

Journalists, pundits, and politicians have been holding up [Ryan](#)'s budget plan as being “bold,” etc., but in making such claims regarding the ideas of this “flimflam” man (as Nobel prize-winning economist Paul [Krugman](#) has dubbed him), they are expressing their own ignorance. Unfortunately, our society at present seems to have leaders—and many followers—whose ideas suggest that they have come from another planet! Why is our society so “screwed up”? Perhaps Thomas Frank has the answer in his [Pity the Billionaire: The Hard-Times Swindle and the Unlikely Comeback of the Right](#) (2012). I'll have to read his book to find out! Perhaps Jerry Mander's [new book](#) as well.

Endnotes

1. Economists might not want to admit it, but what seems to have prompted the development of supply-demand analysis was the embarrassing fact that Karl Marx was in the “classic” tradition of using the labor theory of value. Supply-demand analysis permitted economists to dissociate themselves from Marx, and regain a claim to be in the “classic” tradition while removing Marx

from it. See Benjamin Ward, *What's Wrong With Economics?* New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1972, pp. 16 and 58.

2. See Toffler's *The Third Wave*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980, Chapter 20 ("The Rise of the Prosumer"), pp. 251 – 73.
3. Adam Smith did not, interestingly enough, believe that machinery would improve productivity of labor much; rather, he emphasized the importance of a division of labor.

[August 19, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/08/19/but-is-ruin-a-bad-thing/>]

But is Ruin a *Bad* Thing?

Alton C. Thompson

The two [Clay Bennett](#) cartoons depicted below both suggest that the election of the [Rhombney-Ryan](#) team would spell disaster (“ruin”) for the United States, because both—and especially Ryan—are supporters of what has come to be known as “[supply side economics](#)”—which is



“a school of [macroeconomic](#) thought that argues that [economic growth](#) can be most effectively created by lowering barriers for people to produce (supply) goods and services, such as lowering [income tax](#) and [capital gains tax](#) rates, and by allowing greater flexibility by reducing regulation. According to supply-side economics, consumers will then benefit from a greater supply of goods and services at lower prices. Typical policy recommendations of supply-side economists are lower [marginal tax rates](#) and less regulation.”

Supply-side economics is a cousin of

[laissez-faire](#) thought in that whereas *laissez-faire* thought has a “free market” orientation—i.e., insists that governments should not “interfere” in the conduct of business—supply-side economics is *more* than a negative “philosophy” in that it argues that although governments should “let alone” in certain respects, they *need* to have the power of taxation. However, in *wielding* that power, governments need to ensure that they do not create roadblocks for business firms.

Supporters of the Rhombney-Ryan team would disagree with Bennett that the leadership provided those two gentlemen would result in economic ruin, were they to win the presidential election in November. Be that as it may, I have no interest here in arguing otherwise. Rather,



my starting point is that their election *would* lead to economic ruin, with my question being: Would that be a bad thing?—a question that I answer in the negative.

The line of reasoning that I develop in this essay parallels the one I used in “[Thank you, Deniers!](#)” except that the earlier essay focused on climate change “deniers,” whereas the present essay is concerned just with two specific politicians. Both are “deniers,” but are much more than that—a matter, however, that I will not comment on here, given that much has already been written about the “fab two”—including [Robert Reich](#), [Pierre Tristam](#), [Matthew Rothschild](#) (editor of *The Progressive*, published here in Wisconsin), [Catholic theologians](#), and [Catholic bishops](#). The perspective used by the above-mentioned individuals/organizations differs substantially from mine, however, in that they all perceive the disaster that lies ahead if Rhombney and Ryan as “bad,” whereas I *welcome* that disaster.

The basic assumption that underlies my viewpoint is that our society will be collapsing within a few decades *regardless* of who wins the fall presidential election. As I try to make clear in my “[Scumbags and \(Intellectual\) Prostitutes](#),” Bill McKibben recently favored us with some chilling numbers regarding global warming. Bill did not himself use his numbers to suggest that our society was on a path toward collapse, but I don’t know how anyone can reflect on those numbers and *not* conclude that societal collapse is “in the cards”—not only for our society, but for most, perhaps all, societies, as a result of the various phenomena associated with global warming.

President [O’Bomber](#) has done nothing of consequence relative to global warming—one reason being that he obviously has no clue as to how serious a problem it is. Indeed, it is past time when we *can* do anything to halt the further “progress” of global warming—which means that our only choice now is that of *adaptation*. One hears some people talking about “sustainability,” but that is now an obsolete concept: It is concept having a *resource* orientation that tacitly assumes that “climate change” is not occurring. It’s clear that O’Bomber doesn’t realize this, and the thinking of Rhombney and Ryan is so obsolete that not even the concept of sustainability plays any role in their thinking.

Although societal collapse is likely to occur regardless of which team is elected in November, it’s likely to occur *sooner* under the Rhombney-Ryan team—and in a manner more *propitious* so far as adaptation is concerned. And *that’s* why I hope that the Rhombney-Ryan team wins the election.

Why might it help us give attention to adaptation *earlier* than might be the case were [O’Bomber](#) to win the election? The Rhomney-Ryan team is proposing draconian measures that, if implemented, will cause a great deal of pain with the poor and members of the working class. That pain on the one hand is likely to result in a great deal of violence, but also result in a great

deal of highly-publicized criticism of their policies on the part of certain members of our society. I especially expect that religious leaders might become vociferous in criticizing their policies—with perhaps Catholic theologians (such as my friend Dan Maguire) and Catholic bishops leading the way.

This widespread pain, combined with vociferous criticisms of the policies *causing* the pain, may create a situation in which the issue of adaptation can come to the fore. *If* it does, we may wake up to the need for adaptation early enough that a significant portion of our population—the world’s population—can be saved. Climate scientists who argue that global warming will wipe out most of the world’s population before this century is over may very well be correct. It seems to me, however, that if we were to begin thinking seriously about adaptation soon, more lives could be saved. Not most, but more.

What my message here is, then, in brief: Irony of ironies! The election of the Rhombney-Ryan team may have consequences wholly unanticipated by those two gentlemen—by most people, indeed: It may help us wake up to the need for adaptation, perhaps even to the extent that societal *transformation* will occur instead of societal *collapse*. Wonder of wonders!

[August 23, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/08/23/climate-change-complacency-neither-belief-nor-denial/>]

Neither Believer Nor Denier

Alton C. Thompson

Regarding what is often referred to as “[climate change](#),” three categories of people can be identified:

- Believers—those who agree with the majority of climate scientists that global warming *is* occurring.
- Deniers—those who claim, on the basis of supposedly solid evidence and reasoning, that global warming is *not* occurring; or who simply deny global warming for *ideological* reasons. (“It *can*’t occur, therefore it *won*’t.”)
- The complacent—those who simply give little thought to the question of whether or not global warming is occurring, it’s simply not something on their “mental map.” (See, e.g., Chuck Gasparovic’s “[Climate Change Complacency](#).”)

In this essay my focus is on people in the third group, and I offer some possible reasons why people would be in this group.

First, global warming seems so *abstract* to most, so far removed from their everyday lives. As Gasparovic puts it in his recent essay (cited above):

when most of us woke up this morning, it looked a lot like yesterday morning. The clock radio turned on, hot water came out of the shower, the toaster worked. It did not seem much warmer outside nor could we look out our windows and see any signs of melting glaciers or rising sea levels. And even if climate change did darken our thoughts, most of us quickly relegated it to the backs of our minds, some, like Tom [“an agribusiness banker in Greeley, Colorado, a Republican, and one of the nicest people I have ever met”], with knee-jerk disbelief, others with a slight tinge of guilt or maybe an exculpatory damning of the oil companies, because . . . didn’t we already have enough stress in our lives without having to worry about *that* shit hitting the fan, too? And, after all, what could we do about it?

The news media give us stories of extreme weather events, and some of the consequences of such events (such as “wild fires”), but most of us fail to “connect the dots”—and thereby conclude that these extreme weather events just might be evidence that global warming is underway.

Second, the media themselves bear responsibility for widespread complacency, for although climate scientists for the most part publish their research finds in technical professional journals, some also express their views at professional meetings—where at least some journalists are present. But journalists’ reports of such meetings tend to downplay the seriousness of the global warming problem—perhaps because their editors insist on this, or their editors themselves re-write journalists’ reports so that they don’t sound so alarmist. (Morton Mintz used the apt phrase [“freedom of the press”](#) to refer to the press’s irresponsibility.)

Some “popularizers” (such as Bill McKibben) have arisen who have made an effort to educate the public on the basics of global warming. But only a few read their books/articles, and little or no reference is made to their works in the mass media—so that even the “popularizers” fail to educate the public. The fault here, however, lies not with people such as Bill McKibben but with the mass media for failing to summarize and reference the works of such people.

In the mainstream media one rarely encounters references to “global warming,” and even more rarely encounters detailed discussions of the topic. Attention may be given to unusual weather events—such as floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and droughts—but rarely is the phrase “global warming” mentioned in connection with those events—and if it is, the stories mentioning it are likely to be short, and “buried.”

Thus, an important reason why so many in our society are complacent regarding global warming is that the mainstream media—newspapers, popular magazines, television—give so little information to the public on the subject. The main role of these media seems to be to divert the public’s attention from important issues—because, one would assume, their advertisers don’t want to alarm the public, and then stop purchasing their products or services. Needless to say, our political “leaders” don’t do anything to educate the public either—not surprising given that many of them are deniers.

A third factor of importance is one that has occurred to me as I have been re-reading Kent Nerburn’s [*Neither Wolf Nor Dog: On Forgotten Roads With An Indian Elder*](#) (1994). The elder in this case is a Lakota Indian given the name “Dan” by Nerburn. At one point (p. 59) Dan says the following to Mr. Nerburn:

“Do you hear that bird?” asked Dan.

I told him that I did.

“Do you know what he is saying?”

“I don’t speak ‘bird’,” I answered.

"You should," he twinkled. "Learn a lot. The birds are 'two-legs', like us. They are very close to us. He is calling to another. He is saying it will rain soon."

"You can tell that?"

"Yes, and I can tell that the wind is switching to the north and we will soon have colder weather."

"How do you know that?"

"I just do," he responded cryptically. "It's in the voices I hear. I can understand all the trees. The wind. All the animals. The insects. I can tell what a color of the sky means. Everything speaks to me."

What's clear from this passage is that Dan's life has been lived so close to Nature that he has had plenty of opportunity to listen to the sounds of Nature, and observe the behavior of various animals and insects—and has taken advantage of that opportunity. As a result, he has been able—on the unconscious level—to make generalizations that enable him to make predictions about what's about to happen next. It is in this sense that the trees, e.g., "speak" to him.

The world that most of us live in today is very unlike Dan's world in being highly urbanized. The *physical* world that most of us live in, then, is primarily a human-made (more specifically, *man-made*) one of buildings and streets/roads, etc. We are interested in how natural phenomena affect *us* (reflected in the prominence of weather reports during "news" broadcasts), but our *way of life*—involving, as it does (in many cases), preparing for work, traveling to work, sitting at a desk for 8 hours or so, then traveling back home—is one that basically *removes* us from the natural world. *Because* it does, although we have some sensitivity to how the natural world affects us, we tend to be totally oblivious of how *we* affect the natural world. As a consequence, we can affect—and have affected!—the natural world negatively without even being aware of doing so. In doing so, we have inadvertently affected our own lives—and the effects of our past actions will become increasingly prominent—but so far have not (except for a few) awakened to that fact. Soon, however, we will be learning—to our disadvantage!—that causes have effects even though we either remain oblivious to them or deny them.

Even those in our society whose everyday activities bring them in close contact with the natural world feel little connection with it. For example, for most farmers land is simply a commodity—an "input"—and as they drive their tractors through their fields, the noise of the tractor drowns out any sounds coming from nature; and because the tractor's cab may be enclosed, and the farmer is listening to the radio or a CD, farmers further prevent themselves from hearing the sounds of nature—and more generally have the feeling that they are a *part* of nature.

Not only are our lives *physically* removed from nature, they are, fourth, *mentally* removed as well. The thought processes in which we are engaged while working tend to be far removed from events that are occurring in the natural world, and during our leisure time we are thinking about other people, about sports, about the world of entertainment, about the latest lie or stupid statement made by a politician, etc. That is, our minds tend to be occupied with “current events”—and usually trivial ones at that; and whatever thought we give to the future is typically flawed by the fact that the present is simply projected into the future, with no thought regarding how global warming will *affect* that future. For an intelligent species, ours is incredibly stupid—and (to allude to a book by [James Lovelock](#)) Gaia is, therefore, likely to get its revenge.

The final point that I would like to make is that thinking in this society tends to be highly *individualistic*. [Daniel Elazar](#) has argued that (from a political culture standpoint) the United States can be divided into Moral, Individual, and Traditional culture areas, but it is clear that an individualistic mindset is the dominant one in this country—and always has been. What *that* fact implies is that people not only have difficulty thinking in *societal* terms, but beyond the near term. For that reason alone, then, Americans have difficulty thinking about global warming: global warming goes against the grain of the sort of thinking that imprisons their minds.

Gasparovic closes his essay with these words:

So ignorance and disbelief, in spite of a small group of influential naysayers, are not really the problems. Nor is the only problem the corporations that benefit from fossil fuel extraction and pay well for that benefit before every election. The bigger problem is the rest of us. We are the great majority who can see what’s going on but do nothing about it. Our complacency is the problem, our convenient cynicism about what can be done, our finger pointing without action, our hoping that someone else will do it for us. Unfortunately, even if we are not concerned about the chaotic collapse of our societies and the world our children and grandchildren will inherit, it appears that conveniently dying of old age before life on earth radically changes may no longer be an option.

However, I see little point in affixing blame for the complacency that prevails regarding global warming, for such an intellectual exercise gets us nowhere. What must be recognized is that if a certain trait possessed by a group or species gives that group/species a survival advantage, that group/species has a high probability of surviving. For humans, ignorance has no survival value; and given that that trait can be changed only with great difficulty—and, realistically, *won’t* get changed on a large scale, soon, or ever—the implication is that our population—most of the world’s population, in fact—is doomed.

Those individuals who recognize this fact, and recognize, further, that their only chance for survival is to begin to engage in adaptive measures, so that they then follow through, *may* survive the ravages of global warming. For don’t fool yourself—*those ravages will come*. But even if one *does* start to engage in adaptive measures, there is no guarantee that one will survive

anyway—which fact, if recognized by those thinking of adapting, may, of course, cause them to accomplish suicide instead. It’s true that this *may* be a painless option (so the [song asserts](#))—and *this path may very well become a very common one taken in the near future*. But taking such an option will do nothing for the “salvation” of our species—assuming that “salvation” is even possible, of course.

The Problems With Problems

Alton C. Thompson

Problems come in a variety of “shapes and sizes”:

- They exist at different *scales*—individual, household, neighborhood, city, region, country, the world.
- They vary from a *temporal* standpoint—from *current* ones (the list here is seemingly endless!) to *developing* ones (which may or may not accelerate in intensity—such as global warming) to *possible future* ones (such as thermonuclear holocaust).
- Related to this, they occupy different *positions* in a causal chain. For example, “materialism” may be identified as a problem, but in itself be regarded as a *cause* of problems, while also being a *consequence* of still other factors/problems.
- They vary in degree of *importance*—although it is difficult to be objective on this matter: If one has problems *oneself*, it is *those* problems which are likely to have most significance in one’s mind; if one lives in a neighborhood that has many problems, it is *those* problems which may dominate one’s thinking; etc.

If one is attempting to be an objective observer/analyst, so that one’s focus is on problems “out there” rather than one’s own problems, one tends to focus on a *single* problem (or group of closely-related problems), and to attempt to answer three questions:

- *Why* does the problem exist—e.g., how and why did it arise?
- *What* can, and should, be done—and by whom, or what agency—to solve this problem?
- How *quickly* can the problem be solved?

Much time and expense is expended in identifying problems, determining their nature and extent, developing explanations of them, and either oneself acting to solve the problem or attempting to convince a governmental unit (e.g., via one’s “representatives”) or private agency to address the problem. And such activities provide employment to many. The latter fact, however, is *itself* a problem because those engaged in such activities develop a *vested interest* in “their” problem, which fact may result in actions, undertaken unconsciously, that tend to *perpetuate* the problem.

One problem with problems, then, is that “forces” are operating in a society that tend to perpetuate the problem, with actions ostensibly directed at solving the problem *themselves* serving to perpetuate the problem. *That* fact gives one little basis for optimism, obviously, if one has a genuine concern to see problems solved.

Even were *that* problem not operating, problems would remain that would make difficult the solving of social problems. For example, a given problem (such as “crime”) tends to be studied in isolation from other problems. That is, academic specialists tend to arise whose focus is on a single problem or group of closely related problems—a phenomenon that likely has its basis in the “publish or perish” syndrome that prevails in most colleges/universities.

The *advantage* of specialization is that it enables one to study a given problem in depth; the *disadvantage*, however, is that a focus on a single problem tends to cause one to ignore how that problem is related to *other* problems—either as cause or effect. For example, if one’s focus is on Problem A and Problem B is a (but not necessarily *the*) cause of Problem A, and Problem B is growing rapidly, at some point the expansion of Problem B may overwhelm Problem A—rendering one’s focus on Problem A a waste of time and resources.

What this possibility illustrates is that it is essential to *prioritize* problems. Finding a niche in the “problem field” may contribute to one’s continued employment, and may enable one to “rise” to prominence in one’s academic discipline, but if one’s choice of specialty turns out to be one that lacks *importance*, for whatever reason(s), one’s work will lack *lasting* value.

As my recent “[Neither Believer nor Denier](#)” perhaps suggests, there are good reasons for *not* expecting “ordinary” people to have an interest in problems that do not involve them directly. And personal observation should teach one to expect little from our political leaders—except for the expectation that they will cause, or at least act to intensify, existing problems (in part because

some such “leaders”—such as Mitt [Rhombney](#)—are opportunists, and others—such as Paul Ruin (given that name by cartoonist Clay Bennett) are ideologues. However, one would like to think that academics not only have more intelligence and knowledge than either “ordinary” people or politicians, but are also *able* to determine what is truly important to study, and *at liberty* to do so.

The fact of the matter, however, is that academia *itself* places constraints on



scholars, with the consequence that the most important problems that face us at present do not necessarily receive the attention that they warrant. Some scholars, of course, are able to break through the barriers that make it difficult to do significant research. \However, even such individuals tend to be committed to a middle- or upper-middle class way of life, and are therefore unable to entertain the possibility that such a way of life is *itself* a problem!

The two most significant problems that face us as a species at present are “global warming” and the threat of thermonuclear holocaust. Regarding the latter possibility, just a few people in the world are in a position to determine whether or not this occurs—such as Israel’s Nutandyahoo. Thus, all that we ordinary people can do is “hope and pray” that those in such positions have enough common sense not to put the very continued existence of our species at risk.

The other major problem (global warming), however, is a “different sort of animal.” Its cause is “greenhouse gas” emissions that our ancestors “contributed” to the atmosphere, and those of us now living are continuing to emit—in large part because our way of life virtually *forces* us to pollute. Some of us are more responsible—directly and indirectly—for emitting these gases into the atmosphere than are others; but the “contribution” of even the worst polluter in the world is but a small part of the total.

Given this latter fact, if a given individual decides to “go green” and try his or her utmost to minimize direct and indirect emissions of greenhouse gases, those efforts will have no effect on reducing the problem. For not only are individual actions insignificant as causes of the problem, the [problem itself](#) has either reached a point—or soon will—such that *nothing* can be done to solve the problem.

Most in our society—including in academia—are oblivious to that fact—a matter that I addressed in my previously-cited “Neither Believer nor Denier.” Those who *do* “get it,” however, and who therefor realize that efforts at *adaptation* are the only answer, are faced with the problems that:

- They may recognize that they lack the *knowledge and skills* necessary for adaptive efforts.
- They lack the *resources* to proceed with adaptive efforts.
- They are aware of no one providing any sort of *leadership* of which they might take advantage.
- They recognize that efforts to adapt might be futile—so that it is difficult for them to generate any interest in trying to “save” themselves and their families.

It is *these* problems which dwarf all others in importance today—and, unfortunately, it appears that they will *remain* unaddressed. The recent (August 25, 2012) death of [Neil Armstrong](#) reminds us that we are able to meet technological challenges. But when it comes to important problems—life or death challenges—we are either unable or unwilling to face them. I realize that I have not provided a happy ending to my “story” here, but I don’t know of any other ending to provide, if being honest is the goal.

[August 31, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/08/31/does-the-answer-lie-with-politics/>]

Does the Answer Lie With Politics?

Alton C. Thompson

Henry Giroux, in his recent “[Authoritarian Politics in the Age of Casino Capitalism](#),” begins by painting a bleak picture of the current state of our society, and then makes these recommendations:

The issue should no longer be how to work within the current electoral system, but how to dismantle it and construct a new political landscape that is capable of making a claim on equity, justice, and democracy for all of its inhabitants.

And:

Yet, the current historical moment seems at an utter loss to create a massive social movement capable of addressing the totalitarian nature and social costs of a religious and political fundamentalism that is merging with an extreme market-fundamentalism. In this case, a fundamentalism whose idea of freedom extends no further than personal financial gain and endless consumption. Under such circumstances, progressives should focus their energies on working with the Occupy movement and other social movements to develop a new language of radical reform and to create new public spheres that will make possible the modes of critical thought and engaged agency that are the very foundations of a truly participatory and radical democracy. Such a project must work to develop vigorous educational programs, modes of public communication, and communities that promote a culture of deliberation, public debate, and critical exchange across a wide variety of cultural and institutional sites. Ultimately, it must focus on the end goal of generating those formative cultures and public spheres that are the preconditions for political engagement and vital for energizing democratic movements for social change—movements willing to think beyond the limits of a savage global capitalism.

His answers to the current problems of our society appear, then, to be:

- . . . construct a new political landscape. . . .
- . . . develop a new language of radical reform. . . .
- . . . create new public spheres that will make possible the modes of critical thought and engaged agency that are the very foundations of a truly participatory and radical democracy.

Underlying these “solutions” is the assumption that there is a *political* answer to our problems. Not a *conventional* such answer, true—for Giroux eschews working “within the current electoral system,” and argues, rather, that we must “construct a new political landscape.” Giroux does not, however, clarify the “shape” of the “new political landscape” that he advocates.

That's not the principal problem that I have with his solution, however, for:

- Any political solution ignores the fact that societies are systems
- At any given time, a societal system tends to be dominated by one of the components of that system.
- The dominant component at present (and for the past several hundred years now) is the economy (its financial sector in particular at present).
- The other components of the society—education, religion, culture, etc.—and political—play a *subservient* role to the economy. That is, they tend to serve the needs of the dominant element, rather than being independent of that dominant element.

From the facts that (a) our society is a system, and (b) dominated by the economic component, it follows that political innovation of the sort (whatever it is!) advocated by Giroux is unlikely to occur. I won't say "impossible," for history is full of surprises. But the likelihood that a movement for political innovation will succeed in our country is slight.

That's not the end of the story, however. What talk of political innovation (among so many other topics!) ignores is that the world is changing, whether or not we *want* it to. The numbers cited by Bill McKibben in a [recent article](#) are frightening indeed. They suggest that at some point in the near future we will cross a global warming threshold (if we haven't already!), after which the various phenomena associated with global warming will *intensify*—thereby making life more and more difficult for us humans. It's likely, in fact, that at some point societies—including ours—will begin to collapse under the strain, with mass deaths occurring.

What this possibility suggests is that efforts to engage in political innovation would be *misguided*, for they would not be addressing the *primary* problem facing us humans at present. And as the problem of global warming itself can no longer be addressed in any meaningful way—i.e., a way that would halt, and perhaps even reverse it—it follows that our only choice today is to engage in *adaptive efforts*—with even *such* efforts coming with no guarantee that they will result in the "salvation" of many. It's conceivable, in fact, that regardless of what we do, it will be "too little, too late"—and our species will go the way of the dinosaurs.

Despite that possibility, we must resolve to "give it the old college try" so far as adaptation is concerned. In doing so, there are two possible avenues—doing so (a) as individuals/households, or (b) as members of small communities. [Training programs](#) exist for those interested in wilderness survival, but such programs exemplify, and help perpetuate, one of the worst features of our society, its over-emphasis on *individualism*—on *me* and *mine*. What's needed, rather, is an effort to retain some semblance of civilized existence while being engaged in the process of

adaptation—and that can be accomplished only by creating small communities (of the right sort) within the existing society.

What principles should be followed in doing so (beyond the question of what would need to be done for adaptation purposes)? Having just completed a re-reading of Kent Nerburn's [*Neither Wolf Nor Dog: On Forgotten Roads With an Indian Elder*](#) (given the name “Dan” in Nerburn’s book), I find it impossible to put out of my mind these statements by “Dan” to Mr. Nerburn:

You want to know how to be like Indians? Live close to the earth. Get rid of some of your things. Help each other. Talk to the Creator. Be quiet more. Listen to the earth instead of building things on it all the time. (p. 161)

And:

I think this is hard for you to understand. But our old people were our best people. Nowadays, the world is all for the young people. It wasn’t that way for us. We were taught that the old people and the babies were the closest to God and it was for them that we all lived. (p. 257)

The point today is not, of course, to “be like Indians” in a literal sense. Rather, it’s to recognize that they had sustainable ways of life—which we do not!—and to attempt to combine the best features of their ways of life with our own. Beyond attending to the matter of *adaptation per se*, I can’t imagine a better principle to follow than the one identified by “Dan” in the second quotation above—that rather than living for *ourselves*, we should live for the old and the very young in our society. Given that this is a “Christian” society in which the “commands” of Matthew 25 supposedly provide authoritative guidance—and that those “commands” are perfectly consistent the principle enunciated by Dan—following Dan’s principle should not be a controversial matter.

Ironically, however, rabid individualism—expressed well in vice presidential candidate Paul Ruin (the name given to Ryan by cartoonist Clay Bennett)—is the ruling “philosophy” in this society. Ruin—a “devout” Catholic—claims that his ideas have their basis in Catholic social teaching; however, noted Catholic theologian Daniel C. [Maguire](#), e.g., begs to disagree—and vociferously—with that claim. With good reason!

The dominant mode of thinking in this country is not only greatly out of tune with the religious ideals of Christianity and other religions; it is the likely source of most of our problems. For that reason seeking to bring about political innovation à la Giroux would be fruitless, and the growing threat of global warming forces us to recognize that we must begin a process of adaptation. Once we realize that, we are forced to think about the “shape” that adaptation should take, and it is here that an opportunity arises—an opportunity to create a New Society within the shell of the Existing Order; a New Society built on a different—and far better—foundation than the one upon which the Existing Order is based.

This is our challenge today; and although only a few will take up that challenge, their “can do” spirit—which they will have as Americans—may result in the building of a New Society that is *worth* living in—unlike the Existing Order! The New Society is unlikely to be able to accommodate more than a few of us, but the selectivity involved in the creation of that New Society is likely to enable it to be successful. The “news” here has both bad and good elements—with the former being inevitable, and the latter being encouraging.

It’s conceivable, I suppose, that I am being unduly pessimistic regarding what global warming might do to societies (including ours, of course) and the human population, so that from *that* standpoint building a New Society will be *unnecessary*. However, I would argue that even if global warming fails to be as damaging as I anticipate, the building of a New Society would be desirable anyway: Our society is a miserable place to live, and likely to get even more miserable; given that it *cannot* be reformed, the only answer for societal improvement is to create a *New* Society within the shell of the existing one. The role that the threat(s) posed by global warming can do for us is to provide the *impetus* necessary for creating a New Society. Thus, even though the “deniers” may be right (unlikely!), *belief* that they are not may help propel us in a positive direction—and that’s why *belief* in global warming is so important.

If belief in global warming serves to propel us in the direction of building a New Society, we must keep in mind that the values that we have acquired in being a part of our society may very well steer us in the wrong direction—so that rather than creating a society worth living in, we simply replicate the Existing Order. Fortunately, those drawn to the task of creating a New Society are likely to be *atypical* in their values, which fact should help ensure that they do *not* create a mere “[replica in miniature](#)” of the Existing Order.

[<http://www.newsgrape.com/a/CYZnsa9S4R4b1Ca7gqnIZg/the-peculiarity-of-laissez-faire/>]

[September 20, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/09/20/the-peculiarity-of-laissez-faire/>]

The Peculiarity of *Laissez-Faire*

Alton C. Thompson

“Lord, what fools these mortals be!”
Puck, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,
Act 3, scene 2

When William Shakespeare [1564 – 1616] wrote these words, he wasn’t referring to people’s acceptance of *laissez-faire* thinking, of course. The words *are*, however, appropriate for those who accept the cluster of conclusions/directives associated with such thinking. (See the ten “Conclusions” that I list in my recent [essay](#).) Although I offer ten “Comments” on the assumptions/conclusions associated with *laissez-faire* thinking in that essay, I did not exhaust the list of possible comments there. Therefore, I continue the discussion in the present essay, in this one focusing on the *peculiar* nature of *laissez-faire* thinking. I begin with some *general* comments on the matter, and then identify and discuss some more *specific* peculiarities.

Some General Comments

From an *empirical* perspective an economy can be conceived from different “angles”: the *sequence* in which they occur (e.g., primary, secondary, etc.), their “basicness” (e.g., “basic” and “non-basic”), their nature as activities (e.g., agriculture, manufacturing), etc. With *laissez-faire* thinking, however, there is but *one* way of perceiving an economy—and that one way is a rather peculiar one. What makes it peculiar in particular is that *laissez-faire* thinking pertains to a purely *hypothetical* situation rather than a *real-world* one.

Given that fact, one has a right to ask: What is its *point*, its *purpose*? What kind of an animal is it, anyway?

For example, is it a *theory*? I conceive a theory as a set of statements (an *explanans*), most having strong empirical support, that “produce”—in a logical sense—an empirically-based statement(s) (the *explanandum*). I would add that usually (except in the case of theories created to explain historical events) the *explanandum* is law-like in character, and that it is said to be “explained” by virtue of the fact that it is logically derivable from the statements that constitute the *explanans*.

Given this concept of “theory,” does *laissez-faire* qualify as a theory? The answer is “No”—because the statements in its *explanans* lack an empirical basis, as do the statements in its *explanandum* (which in this case I conceive as a series of ten statements; see my earlier essay). One may *call* it a theory, but that doesn’t *make* it one! To do so is to engage in intellectual chicanery—a not uncommon phenomenon in our society!

If it’s not a *theory*, is it, then, what might be called a “normative structure”? That is, does its “*explanans*” portion contain one or more normative principles which, in conjunction with “factual” statements, produces a statement(s) of what “should be”? Put another way, does the “*explanans*” portion provide a logical basis—i.e., a rationale—for the statements of what “should be”?

Were it conceived in this manner, we would want to know (a) *what* those normative principles were (as stated in the “*explanans*” portion of the set of statements), and (b) whether we would want to *accept* those normative principles. The latter would involve making a judgment on the norms themselves as well as any norms that, in one’s judgment, were missing from the statements, but integral to the argument. (Note that I have put “*explanans*” in quotation marks because although the “explanatory statements” in a normative structure are formally identical to those in a theory, at least one of the statements in a normative argument expresses a normative principle.)

The problem here, of course, is that norms, by their very nature, are of a *subjective* character. That is, the norms regarded as “acceptable” by one person need not coincide with the norms so regarded by any other given person. Those who offer “shoulds” to us want, of course, to accept them as our own; but we are under no obligation to do so. Even if we *do* accept the “should” of another, that does not make them objective. “Shoulds” express *opinions*, which may or may not be the product of a reasoning process. But even if they are, they are no less “mere” opinions.

Is, then, the set of statements that constitute the *laissez-faire* argument of a normative nature? My answer is that the *conclusions* are, but that the *rationale* from which those conclusions derive are too lacking in “truth-value” to provide an adequate rationale. And even if the rationale did not have *that* problem, the fact that normative principles are, by their very nature, subjective means that what one person regards as an acceptable normative principle need not coincide with what another person does. The principal conclusion here, though, is that the “factual” statements that constitute the “explanatory” part of the *laissez-faire* argument are lacking in realism, and for that reason alone the *laissez-faire* argument cannot be regarded as an adequate normative structure.

In my earlier essay (cited at the beginning) I used the term “model” in conjunction with the *laissez-faire* argument, which then raises the question: Did I use that word properly in the

previous essay or, rather, did I use it simply because I couldn't think of a more adequate term? To answer that question, I first need to clarify my concept of "model"—recognizing that that term given a variety of (closely-related) meanings. It should note that *my* concept of model-building has been strongly influenced by the efforts, years ago, of Johann Heinrich [von Thünen](#) to explain agricultural patterns.

I conceive a model as a logical structure created in the first place as an initial attempt to explain a real-world situation. The model itself consists of a series of assumptions pertaining to the causative (or, more broadly, explanatory) factors believed to be relevant for explaining the real-world situation in question. In creating this initial model, the goal is being *inclusive* so far as explanatory factors are involved, and the specific assumptions made are designed to be *tractable* rather than *realistic*. That is, the assumptions are specified in such a way that conclusions can be readily deduced from them.

The "predictions" of an initial model are likely to be "off the mark"—i.e., to not compare well with the real-world situation that they are meant—eventually—to explain/predict. However, for the model-builder, the initial model is not an end product; rather, it is simply the starting point in a process of model development. The next task, then, is to "complexify" the initial model by introducing realism into one or more of its assumptions—likely the assumption(s) pertaining to the explanatory factor believed to be of greatest relevance—and then "run" the model again, and again compare the model prediction with the comparable real-world situation. This process would continue until the model predicts with a degree of accuracy judged "adequate" (e.g., "as good as I can get it") by the model-builder.

Given this concept of "model," the question arises: Can, then, the *laissez-faire* argument be regarded as a model? Again, the answer is "No," because no "complexification" is associated with the argument, no attempt to make its predictions match, as closely as possible, a real-world situation.

Well, what *is* the *laissez-faire* argument, then? My answer is one that is not very complimentary: It is an intellectual exercise that is used to justify certain normative statements—such as, "Government must be kept out of the economy, because it can only 'interfere' in the workings of the economy, and thereby help create non-optimal results." Using the word "intellectual" here has, though, connotations that are not warranted, because the argument itself is fallacious: The conclusion(s) from the statements constituting the "argument" itself may logically follow from those statements, but that conclusion(s) applies solely to a *hypothetical situation* derived from assumptions that are utterly lacking in realism. Given that fact, there is *no logical basis whatsoever* for concluding that those conclusions have real-world relevance. Yet that is precisely what devotees of *laissez-faire* thinking do!

This point should be obvious, but evidently is not. As a result, charlatans such as Paul Ruin (whose *legal* name is Ryan) have been able to bamboozle those with little education and intelligence into believing that the “government can only interfere” principle has a solid “theoretical” basis. To repeat what Shakespeare had Puck say, “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” Yes, indeed!

Some Specific Comments

In this section I make a few “bulleted” points regarding what I regard as some of the most prominent *specific* flaws associated with the *laissez-faire* argument:

- As I noted in my earlier essay, the *laissez-faire* argument is implicitly a *physics-based* one; what *that* implies is that it treats humans as if they were identical lifeless robots! Put another way, it clearly is *not* a *biology-based* argument, and for that reason alone is deficient—given that we are all biological beings!

Biologically, people *differ* one from another in various respects; indeed, if sexual reproduction can be said to have a *purpose* (rather than a *function*), that purpose is to ensure that diversity exists within a species. Put another way, diversity within a group is *natural*—is what Nature “intends”—presumably because diversity provides a species with greater *survivability potential* than would be the case with uniformity. In fact, what *enables* (but does not *cause*) *evolution* to occur with a given species is diversity within a given species. Although to say that diversity is “good” is to make a value judgment, it should be clear that few would question that value judgment—for if our species were not characterized by diversity, it wouldn’t exist!!

Humans, as they existed in so-called “primitive” groups prior to the Agricultural Revolution, varied both in inherited and acquired characteristics, but primarily in the former. Today, however, given that we live in much larger-scale and complex societies, the characteristics that a person has are attributable to heredity, experiences, context, etc., it being difficult to “parse out” the roles of the various explanatory factors for some particular characteristic. But *that* fact need not detain us here, for the *laissez-faire* argument assumes that humans are identical biologically, and influenced by no other factors than their (rather strange!) biology. But even the biological factor is *implicit* in the argument, rather than explicit. The main point here, however, is that what the *laissez-faire* argument tacitly assumes regarding the nature of humans is at serious variance with empirical facts.

- The world of *laissez-faire* thinking not only contains no *biological* processes, but no *chemical* ones either. It is, thus, a world in which, e.g., the burning of fossil fuels results in no accumulation of “greenhouse” gases in the atmosphere, and therefore no global warming that has effects on humans (among other species). Related to this, *laissez-faire* thinking is oriented solely to the here-and-now, and tacitly assumes that tomorrow will be much like today. Unfortunately, those who *see* through this mode of thinking seem incapable of seeing *through* it; so that insofar as such thinking is dominant in a society, the likelihood is high that that society will engineer its own destruction—along with the human species, quite possibly (to say nothing of other species).
- The fact that real-world individuals vary in their characteristics (for a variety of reasons), in conjunction with the characteristics of large-scale societies (such as ours), makes possible—and even encourages—the exploitation of some members of a society by other members. This fact of capitalistic societies—which the *laissez-faire* argument was, it would seem, designed (if but unconsciously) to “explain away”!—caught the attention of [Karl Marx](#) [1818 – 1883], whose [Capital](#) exposed this phenomenon: “In *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (1867), Karl Marx proposes that the motivating force of [capitalism](#) is in the [exploitation](#) of [labour](#), whose unpaid work is the ultimate source of [profit](#) and [surplus value](#).”

If exploitation occurs in a Christian country, one might expect that the religious leaders of the country would rail against the country’s economic order. However, most such leaders are too lacking in intelligence and education to understand the workings of the economy; and because the “spirit of capitalism” envelops the country, most grow up acquiring that spirit—with some of them even becoming promoters of the economic order rather than critics of it!

Large-scale societies vary, of course, in the degree to which exploitation is present, for countries vary in their cultural characteristics and histories—with, e.g., Norway (a rather small country!) being an example of an advanced country where exploitation is minimal compared with the United States. However, in all of the advanced countries today *laissez-faire* thinking is dominant; not only that: The *fact* that it is likely is a major ultimate cause of the problems present in them. What this suggests is that if these various problems are to be solved, societal system change will be necessary. Fortunately, global warming is likely to force such change upon us, and the question is whether we will anticipate the societal collapse likely to result from global warming, and begin building a New Society within the existing order, or, rather, will simply let the existing society collapse and hope for the best.

Despite the likelihood that the dominance of *laissez-faire* thinking in modern societies is a major cause of the problems present in those societies, our leaders—being “possessed” by that ideology (for that is what it is!)—not only fail to understand that point, but are convinced that further reductions in the role of government will solve the country’s problems. Again, “what fools”!

- From a societal standpoint the *laissez-faire* argument tacitly assumes that everyone starts at the same starting point—as if we were all in an Olympic race, where fairness prevails. This assumption obviously lacks greatly in realism. However, if one is “possessed” by *laissez-faire* thinking—as so many are in our society, our “leaders” in particular—one will fail to recognize this fact: One’s thinking will be dominated by biographical stories of the “successful” rather than the results of social science research.
- The argument assumes a common motivation for everyone—rational behavior, defined as that behavior having the objective of maximizing one’s income, so that one can acquire as much as possible in the way of “things.” Again, we have here an assumption utterly lacking in realism.
- The reason that it assumes that people will strive to maximize their incomes is that it (tacitly) assumes that well-being comes from, and only from, the consumption of things—the *underlying* assumption here being that people strive to maximize their well-being. However, just as there is no empirical basis for believing that people try to maximize their well-being, neither is there empirical evidence in support of the claim that well-being comes from, and only from, the consumption of things—an assumption that implies that people will not do for others, because that would detract from *their own* well-being/

Recent research has, in fact, demonstrated, however, that doing for others—something enjoined in all of the major religions of the world—is, in fact, an *important* source of personal feelings of well-being. (See, [this](#), for example.) And earlier research/thinking—associated especially with [Abraham Maslow](#) [1908 – 1970]—suggests that there is a hierarchy of personal needs, a hierarchy that includes economic goods, but goes far beyond them. (The needs that Maslow identified were, from lowest to highest: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, self-actualization.)

One of the most remarkable facts about the modern world is that the minds of so many—the “successful” and leaders in particular, it would seem—are “possessed” by *laissez-faire* thinking. It’s as if Nature had decided, at some point in the past, that it needed to rid itself of that pest,

humankind, and hit on the idea of infecting the minds of key people with this “philosophy”—so that they would lead humankind to oblivion.

Nature has good reason to want to rid of us—and may very well succeed, within a few decades!

[September 11, 2012: http://www.newsgrape.com/a/NkIJy_BUR4bpu9VwzZfBg/is-resistance-the-answer-or-a-part-of-the-problem/]

Is Resistance the Answer . . or a Part of the Problem?

Alton C. Thompson

Chris Hedges, in his “[Life is Sacred](#)” column of September 3 said this:

I mourn for our future, for the fading majesty of the natural world, for the folly of the human species. The planet is dying. And we will die with it.

And this:

Civil disobedience, including the recent decision by Greenpeace activists to **chain themselves** to a Gazprom supply vessel and obstruct a Russian oil rig, is the only meaningful form of resistance. Voting is useless. But while I support these heroic acts of resistance, I increasingly fear they may have little effect. This does not [, however,] mean we should not resist. Resistance is a moral imperative. We cannot use the word “hope” if we do not fight back.

In reading Hedges’s column, and the above two passages in particular, I sensed that there was an argument lurking in there somewhere, and after a few false starts concluded that the argument that Hedges was making in his column was as follows:

1. The planet is dying.
2. That’s not a good thing.
3. Because it’s not a good thing, we should do what is necessary to stop that dying.
4. What’s necessary to stop that dying is to engage in resistance efforts: The cause of the planet’s dying is the operation of certain forces, and those forces must therefore be successfully combated if the planet’s dying is to be prevented.
5. However, our efforts are likely to have little effect.
6. Despite that fact, we should engage in such efforts anyway—because resistance is a moral imperative:
7. If something is a moral imperative, we are obligated to do it.

This struck me as a rather odd argument, so I began to wonder if I had erred in my “translation” of Hedges. However, in re-analyzing Hedges’s essay in light of the argument that I was

attributing to him, I concluded that I *had*, in fact, properly “fleshed out” the message that he was trying to convey.

This still left me puzzled, though, for given that he admits (point 5) that resistance is likely to have little effect, I wondered to myself: Why, then, is he offering this as a solution?! His answer appears to be that there is a “moral imperative” to engage in resistance, whether or not one’s efforts are effective, but again I was left with the question: Moral imperative or not, why engage in activities that one believes will be fruitless? Is not doing so a form of self-flagellation?!

Beyond this, I asked myself: *Why* should I believe that there is a “moral imperative” involved here (i.e., in resistance)? In asking myself that question, I was not denying that there are no such things as “moral imperatives.” Rather, what I was questioning was why Hedges thought it necessary to attach a moral imperative to *resistance activities*. Were there not *other* activities that could be engaged in that might not be more fruitful—activities to which one could also think of as involving a “moral imperative”?

I was wrestling with questions such as these yesterday (September 4), and spent a sleepless night last night thinking about them. Then, suddenly at about 3:30 A.M. an answer hit me: What Hedges’s reasoning reflects, I believe, is [his theological background](#). Hedges’s father was Presbyterian minister, and Chris himself “gained a Master of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School, where he studied under [James Luther Adams](#). He was awarded an honorary doctorate in May 2009 from the Unitarian Universalist seminary, Starr King School for the Ministry, in Berkeley, California.”

What relevance might this have? In Judaism and Christianity the *stories* of many human (or human-like) individuals play an important role (Moses, Elijah, Jesus, Paul), but the *principal* “heroes” are two supernatural Beings, God and Satan. These Beings, it turns out, may have their origin in [Zoroastrianism](#)—wherein Ahura Mazda is the equivalent to the God of Judaism-Christianity, and Ahriman is Satan’s equivalent.

Most moderns who think at all of these two Beings tend to think of them as *symbols*. But the ancients tended to think of them as personified *forces*—or (the more intelligent) perhaps just the *names* of forces—that acted in human affairs—external forces that caused one to engage either in “good” or “bad” behaviors. Although these notions are still with us to a degree, when today someone says “The Devil made me do it!,” we interpret that statement as simply an attempt at humor. For today, we speak of behaviors as resulting from *decision-making*, implying that *conscious choice* preceded the behavior in question. We have lately added that one’s biological nature, life experiences, context, etc., may play a role in affecting one’s behavior. But virtually *no one* today would explain the behavior of another on the basis of supernatural forces.

The interesting feature of the old way of explaining behavior is that the two causative forces involved—e.g., God and Satan—were thought of as engaged in *battle* with one another, much as Goliath and David were said to have battled one another. As I thought about that fact, a thought occurred to me: Was Chris Hedges in a sense “resurrecting” this old idea, but under a new guise? Was Hedges thinking of the planet’s “dying” as resulting from “the deadly ecological assault by the corporate state” (to quote from his column)? Was he also thinking of this force as analogous to Satan, it then being necessary for God to combat that force, with the equivalent of God being Resistance?

I’ll admit that this is a rather peculiar line of reasoning, but I find myself concluding that Hedges *was* involved in reasoning of this sort in his concluding that resistance should be engaged in—even if we know in advance that it will be fruitless.

What I’m attributing to Hedges, then, is “possession” by an ideology—an ideology that is of a theological nature, and rooted in the distant past. Perhaps there is a better explanation for why Hedges insists that resistance should be engaged in despite its being ineffectual, but until someone presents me with a more convincing explanation, I will accept the one I have offered above.

Hedges seems to see a “moral imperative” in engaging in resistance, even though it is likely to be fruitless, but I see things differently. The view that forces of evil *must* be battled by forces for good is a view that I refuse to accept in an unqualified manner. Thinking of our current situation in particular—in which the threat posed by global warming looms large, which threat is the basis for Hedges’s column!—my response is that global warming has reached a point such that it *cannot* be reversed. Put another way, it *cannot* be successfully combated. Given this, it would be *foolish* to try to combat it—whether via resistance or some other means.

Given this, what is the “moral imperative”—*if* there is one, that is? Is it to engage in resistance efforts? Is it to do nothing? Just as I see nothing “moral” in doing nothing, so do I see nothing “moral” in resistance efforts—for both are doomed to failure.

For efforts to be “moral,” it seems to me that they must have some chance for at least a degree of “success,” and I see such possible effects in *adaptation*. Interestingly, Hedges *does* make reference to “adaptation” in his essay:

We convince ourselves that global warming does not exist. Or we concede that it exists but insist that we can adapt. Both responses satisfy our mania for eternal optimism and our reckless pursuit of personal comfort.

Perhaps the meaning that *Hedges* assigns to “adapt” is different from the one that *I* assign to that term, but in *my* definition adaptation does not “satisfy our mania” Rather, adaptation is a

strategy for “salvation” (!), in the sense that efforts at adaptation offer us a chance to save at least *some* humans from the ravages that will be unleashed by global warming. Not *all* humans, unfortunately, for I don’t believe that that will be possible. But those humans who begin to engage in adaptive efforts have at least a higher *probability* of surviving than those who don’t.

For *me*, at least, efforts at adaptation *do* involve following a moral imperative—i.e., what Hedges ostensibly values so highly. His strategy of resistance, in contrast, I view as of an *ideological* nature—one rooted in an ancient (and long obsolete!) *theological* perspective. Perhaps one will *feel* that one is doing something important in resisting; but to my way of thinking engaging in resistance efforts is equivalent to doing nothing. Sorry, Chris, but those are my honest views! Put another way, resistance efforts are a part of the *problem*!

[September 27, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/09/27/scientists-and-the-word-should-an-analysis/>]

Scientists and “Should”

Alton C. Thompson

At one point in his “[Is Humanity Pushing Earth Past a Tipping Point?](#),” Brandon Keim asks:

Given incomplete but troubling information [regarding tipping points], what should people do? [Anthony D.] Barnosky and colleagues call for innovations and changes—more-efficient food production, fossil fuel alternatives, better ecosystem management and reduced population growth.

(Keim points out that: “In ‘[Approaching a state shift in Earth’s biosphere](#),’ published June 6 in *Nature*, Barnosky and 21 co-authors cite 100 papers in summarizing what’s known about environmental tipping points.”)

All of the recommendations made by Barnosky and his colleagues seem reasonable, but the question arises: What *qualifies* these scientists to make recommendations as to what “should” be done? Just because a scientist is qualified is able to tell us why something is as it is, how does that qualify him/her to tell us what *should be* done?

If an economist, e.g., tells us that the reason the unemployment rate is high is that (a) our economy is 70% dependent on spending in retail/service establishments, (b) and people lack the money to spend; and then recommends that governmental “stimulus” money be introduced into the economy to stimulate demand, he may be offering a workable solution to the unemployment problem. For if stimulus money is then introduced into the economy by the federal government, it may have a “multiplier” effect: It may result in some being directly employed, with the spending thereby enabled by those newly employed resulting in increased demand, the satisfaction of which would necessitate more hiring

Thus, if an economist recommends to the national government that it introduce a stimulus of a certain magnitude into the economy, the government then does so, the result being a reduction of the unemployment rate to a “reasonable” level, the impression is given that we should *always* rely on economists to tell us how to reduce the unemployment rate, if that’s what we want to see happen: *They* know how the economy operates, so that if the economy is not operating properly, they will not only be able to tell us *why* that’s so, but *what* we must do to fix the problem.

But is what’s true for “fixing” the economy true *across the board*? For example, (a) if scientists agree that global warming is occurring, (b) agree that a “tipping point” may very well be associated with global warming, (c) believe that if certain actions are taken, the tipping point will

not be reached, and (d) even make recommendations as to the sorts of actions to take, should the society's leaders proceed to engage in those actions?

Seemingly, the answer to this question is “yes.” But what if:

- Their claim that a tipping point will not be *reached if certain actions are taken prior to a certain point in time* is a highly *plausible* one (i.e., one with a good *scientific* basis), but the government's leaders decline to act on their recommendations?

Or:

- Their claim that a tipping point will not be *reached if certain actions are taken prior to a certain point in time* turns out to be wrong—and it is reached *before* they say it will?

Each of these is a strong possibility, and those of us who are ordinary citizens are left with the questions:

- If most scientists believe that a tipping point can be avoided, they give the government suggestions on what to do to avoid it, but the government refuses to act, what should I do?
- If I learn that most scientists believe that reaching a tipping point can be avoided, but I don't believe them, believing, rather, that it will occur *sooner*—has even occurred *already*—what should I do?

Relative to the second question, Barnosky is quoted thusly in Keim's article:

“There are some biological realities we can't ignore,” said paleoecologist Anthony Barnosky of the University of California, Berkeley. “What I'd like to avoid is getting caught by surprise.”

This seems to suggest that Barnosky's preference is to set the “bar” rather low regarding a possible tipping point, for it is “better to be safe than sorry.” I agree with this position, but what I find puzzling regarding the scientists referred/alluded to in Keim's article is their seeming lack of “political savvy.” The quotation that I give at the beginning of this essay—referring to “more efficient food production,” etc.—displays an utter lack of realism from the standpoint of what *can actually* get done. The recommendations in that paragraph implicitly assume leadership provided by governmental employees at the national level, without, however, displaying any knowledge of the *likelihood* of those recommendations being followed. As that likelihood is close to zero (0), in my opinion, the question arises: Of what *value*, then, are those recommendations? (A rhetorical question, of course!)

The conclusion that seems reasonable to me given the above discussion is that the recommendations of scientists are not *always* of value. And given that global warming is (quite possibly) a life or death matter, the fact that scientists' recommendations regarding this turn out to be worthless is particularly disturbing.

My position is that the safest assumption is that a tipping point will be reached, and crossed, within a few decades (*assuming that one hasn't been already*—how do we know for sure?) and that the only option that faces us at present, therefore, is one of adaptation. Given that I think it foolish to look to the federal government for leadership regarding that matter, we private citizens must “take matters into our own hands”—and proceed to engage in adaptive measures. As I have commented on this matter in previous essays on this site, I will say nothing about what adaptation might entail in *this* essay.

Despite the fact that severe storms, flooding, fires enabled by drought, etc., have been very much in the news in recent years, the weather forecasters on television and radio have, for the most part, failed to relate these events to global warming. This is unfortunate because an uninformed citizenry will not recognize the danger, and therefore will not act—to adapt or whatever. Perhaps, though, what's important is not *believing* intellectually that global warming is occurring but *feeling* it. Given that possibility, the work that has been done by [Bernie Krause](#) over the past 40 years may be of value for people's awakening: Krause has been recording the sounds of nature, and if one were to listen to his recordings—and *hear* the difference between an environment filled with life, and one lacking much life because of human actions—one's *emotions* might be affected, and one might thereby be motivated to act.

Let me leave you, then, with a quotation from John Vidal's wonderful article on Krause:

"A great silence is spreading over the natural world even as the sound of man is becoming deafening," he [Krause] writes in a new book, [The Great Animal Orchestra](#). "Little by little the vast orchestra of life, the chorus of the natural world, is in the process of being quietened. There has been a massive decrease in the density and diversity of key vocal creatures, both large and small. The sense of desolation extends beyond mere silence.

If you can read this article without tears coming into your eyes, you are a better man than I am! (By the way, I'm not sure if “quietened” is a real word!)

Escaping From Prison

Alton C. Thompson

I don't question the assertion that [visiting people in prison](#) is a "good thing." But what if one is *oneself* in prison—or at least *feels* like one is? What *then* is one to do?

When one is young, one takes the society that one is living in as a "given." And if one's information regarding "what's happening in the world" comes primarily from newspapers, popular magazines, and television, one will *continue* to take one's society for granted—for those sources of information are not only "[fawning](#)," but devoted to keeping their readers/viewers ignorant and misinformed, and diverting their attention from what matters.

However, if, as one grows older, one travels extensively (and is observant in doing so!), reads widely (so that one encounters critiques of one's society, becomes exposed to [utopian thought](#), etc.), and "listens" to the promptings of one's "human nature" (to allude to Thorstein Veblen's [The Theory of the Leisure Class](#) (1899)), one will likely come to recognize that one *does* live in a society, and that one's society is not, by any means, the "best of all possible worlds" (to quote from Voltaire's [Candide](#)).

Such a realization is likely to bring a feeling of discontent with it—perhaps to the point that one begins to feel that one is living in a prison; and that feeling of dissatisfaction can motivate behavior—different people reacting differently, and the same person reacting differently at different periods of time. It can cause one to:

- Become severely depressed—perhaps to the point that one accomplishes suicide.
- Become active in politics—either by supporting certain policies, or oneself running for office.
- Expand one's reading in an effort to gain a better understanding of how one's society "works"—so that one can then learn how to go about "fixing" it.
- Think seriously regarding the *kind of society* one like to be living in.
- Etc.

At different points in my life I have responded differently to the feeling of being imprisoned. For example, a number of years ago I gave thought to starting a new political party, and running for the U. S. House of Representatives. Having a Norwegian heritage, with Norwegians known for being passionate coffee-drinkers, I thought that a good name for this political party would be “Tea Party”—as a joke, of course (for those “in” on it). Little did I know then that several years later a Tea Party would come into existence—being very different in character from the one that I had been envisioning, however. For the election slogan that I had in mind was “If I am elected, I will not serve.” Rather, my plan was create a small eco-community, with the “staff” that I was entitled to hire being people willing to join me in living in that community. I knew that I would never get elected (the people in my campaign would go into neighborhoods dressed like Vikings, and would yell out “fjord”!), my object being to make people laugh and simultaneously to awaken them to need for societal system change. (In 1984 I had published a [strategy](#) for bringing about such change.)

That “plan” was never realized—I had too much sense not to go through with it, as I didn’t want to embarrass my family! But I had fun *thinking* about it.

The idea of a need for societal system change has, however, been with me ever since. I guess that I am a rather odd American in that my thinking has not been directed toward how I might “rise” in my society but, rather, has been concerned the *kind of society* that I would like to be living in, and how to get there. I can’t explain why I acquired that particular “bent,” but the fact that I was raised in small-town Wisconsin and had hammered into me that my responsibility was to develop whatever abilities I had, and then use them to help others—rather than try to be a “success”—likely set my direction in life. I feel guilty for not having done more to help others, but try to tell myself that my “calling” is not so much in that direction but in thinking about how our society should be, and how to change it. (Much of my writing, except for essays written since June, 2012, can be accessed from [this site](#).)

In earlier writings I have commented extensively on both of those matters, but in this essay I would like to identify those features of the “Good Society” that are especially on my mind at present:

- The society that I would like to be living in would be peopled with individuals who had no interest in acquiring things. They would, of course, need to have food for sustenance, clothing for providing modesty and warmth, and shelter. But beyond “necessities”—including some things that would provide a measure of comfort—they would have no interest in acquiring for the sake of acquiring.
- Related to this, given that not much effort would need to be devoted to producing that which was needed for sustenance, or providing some degree of comfort, the society

would be one in which leisure time was abundant. On the one hand, stresses associated in the existing society with work, etc., would be absent (which would contribute to the health of the society's members), and an abundance of time would be available to everyone to pursue whatever interests they had.

- The society's people would have no need to feel superior to others in the society (or "outsiders")—and as a consequence would have no need to engage in "conspicuous display" (Thorstein Veblen's term) of goods.
- They would not feel inferior to anyone else either: With no one in the society "driven" by a need to feel superior to others, not feeling inferior to others would occur almost automatically.
- Related to the matter of inferiority/superiority, no one in the society would feel a need to exercise power/authority over others—either getting others to do what one wants, or exploiting others. Thus, one of the worst features of existing society (of capitalism, Karl Marx would say) would be absent from the Good Society.
- Rather than wanting to *control* others, people would feel an urge to want to *help* others. In doing so, they would, however, strive to do so in a manner that did not damage the self-esteem of those to be helped. In an earlier essay, I referred to a Lakota Indian elder named "Dan," who said that for the Lakota, the prime reason for living was to attend to the society's very young and very old. *That's* the sort of attitude that would prevail in the sort of society that *I* would want to live in.
- As a person who grew up in a small town/rural environment, while young I was able swim in a nearby lake during the summer, skate on that lake during the winter, play on Mt. Morris with my cousin, follow my dad plowing our large garden in bare feet (talk about being close to Heaven, feeling that fresh earth beneath my feet!), go fishing in the summer and hunting in the fall, etc. I still have fond memories of those days. Although I have been not that close to Nature since those times, I have a deep appreciation for being in Nature—and wish that I were living in a society that enabled that as a matter of course.

Is this a dream, or can it become real (to allude to Nicolai Berdyaev's [autobiography](#))? My view is that the existing society cannot be *reformed*, but that that's not "end of story." As I've argued in various previous essays on this site (and suggested in my 1984 article), if one wants to live in a society having characteristics such as those enumerated above, and given that one will not be able to *migrate* to such a society (because none exists!), one will need to get together with like-minded friends/acquaintances, and begin *creating* one—within the society within which one happens to be an inmate. *Doing* this would not be without problems (as I have noted in previous essays), but it *would be* possible.

In fact, not only would it be *possible*, it is now *necessary*—given the threat posed by global warming today. Only a fool would look to government for leadership in preparing for global warming—which would involve *adaptive* efforts, given the stage of “progress” reached by global warming to date. Given *that* fact, if one is to have any hope for “salvation,” one will need to “take matters into one’s own hands.” One *could* do so as a “survivalist,” but the better option is join with others and engage in community-building. *Pursuing that* option would not only enable one to (possibly) survive, but to live in a [decent society](#).

Beyond Mere Survival

Alton C. Thompson

We humans are in a unique position at present:

- We know that (per, e.g., Joseph Tainter's [*The Collapse of Complex Societies*](#)) from a historical standpoint, all complex societies have developed over time, and at some point have collapsed. For that reason alone, we have every reason to believe that *our own* society will collapse at some point in the future.
- Given that global warming is occurring, and given what's known/believed regarding that phenomenon by climate scientists, it's virtually certain that within a matter of decades, societies—including ours, most certainly—will be collapsing all over the world.

Because this second point is of special importance, it warrants some comment here:

Consider the [following](#) (from *The Scotsman*, December 5, 2010):

Professor Kevin Anderson, director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change, believes only around 10 per cent of the planet's population—around half a billion people—will survive if global temperatures rise by 4C.

Anderson's warning comes just eight days before global leaders meet in Copenhagen for the most crucial talks on climate change reversal since the Rio summit in 1992. Current Met Office projections reveal that the lack of action in the intervening 17 years—in which emissions of climate changing gases such as carbon dioxide have soared—has set the world on a path towards potential 4C rises as early as 2060, and 6C rises by the end of the century.

Anderson, who advises the government on climate change, said the consequences were "terrifying".

"For humanity it's a matter of life or death," he said. "We will not make all human beings extinct as a few people with the right sort of resources may put themselves in the right parts of the world and survive.

"But I think it's extremely unlikely that we wouldn't have mass death at 4C. If you have got a population of nine billion by 2050 and you hit 4C, 5C or 6C, you might have half a billion people surviving."

Kevin Anderson is not only a climate scientist, but an advisor to the British government on climate matters. Therefore, the warnings that he issues should be heeded:

- Given existing trends in temperature increase, it's likely that there will be a 4°C. increase in Earth's temperature "as early as 2060" CE—i.e., within 50 years. (So far the increase in temperature attributable to human activities has been about 0.8° C.)
- If such an increase occurs by 2060 CE, Earth's population will be drastically reduced between now and 2060 (will, e.g., perhaps be just 10% of what it is now—the present population being about 7 billion).

Although Anderson does not specify *how* this increase in temperature will result in a decimation of the Earth's population, the following are likely *direct* causes (in order of probable importance)—in my opinion, at any rate:

- Excessive heat.
- Storms (i.e., wind, hail).
- Flooding.
- Fires.
- Disease
- Violence.
- Starvation.

As these phenomena associated with global warming intensify, a "[tipping point](#)" is likely to be reached, after which change will accelerate. And what *that* implies is that conditions within societies will become increasingly abnormal, chaotic—so that at some point they will begin to collapse.

What makes our situation today unique is not the likelihood that our society (along with most others) will collapse *per se*. Rather, it is that we can *anticipate* its collapse—arguing from historical experience, on the one hand, and from what we know/believe regarding global warming, on the other hand.

The significance of the fact that we can anticipate societal collapse is that it provides us with an *opportunity* not faced by those societies that have collapsed before us: An opportunity to plan how we will *cope* with the collapse of our society. For we should be wise enough to read the

“handwriting on the wall” and recognize that our society *will* collapse, and recognize, further, that societal collapse is *inevitable*—so that it would be foolish to “spin our wheels” by trying to prevent its occurrence. In having such wisdom, we will, rather, resign ourselves to societal collapse and turn our attention to escaping the calamity associated with that collapse.

Not merely attempting to *escape* that calamity, however, but doing so in a positive manner. That is, the goal should not be survival for the sake of survival (i.e., “survivalism”), but, rather, the sort of survival that enables us to develop a new way of life that accords with our “[design specifications](#)” as humans, and conforms with goals that, if realized, would yield a Good Society. As I have commented on possible such goals in previous essays, and have recommended the [Structured Interaction Group](#) (SIG) as a vehicle for collectively identifying—and implementing—such goals, I will not pursue that matter further here.

A point that I *would* like to add, however, is that I have just learned about a book that may provide further relevant information for those interested in developing the New Society: [After Collapse: The Regeneration of Complex Societies](#), edited by Glenn M. Schwartz and John J. Nichols. One [reviewer](#) says of the book:

The appeal is obvious: we have learned a lot about collapse, so it would be interesting to learn more about recovery. And indeed it is. Schwartz and Nichols have shepherded to publication a valuable collection, having fourteen essays by eighteen authors, almost all anthropologists or archeologists or both. After Schwartz’s introduction, which includes some general theory, there are eleven essays on societies in specific places at specific times. The Middle East, Greece, the Andes, southeast and east Asia, and Mesoamerica are all represented. Some of those eleven essays also contain important theoretical arguments that Schwartz did not signal in advance. Two essays of reflection and comment conclude the book.

Having just learned of the book, I haven’t had a chance to read it—but it is certainly on my list of books that I must read.

[<http://www.newsgrape.com/a/Dh2SvICM0R4oSSUMwE0bAQ/the-emergence-of-new-geography/>]

[October 15, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/10/15/the-emergence-of-new-geography/>]

The Emerging “New Geography”

Alton C. Thompson

Besides recognizing divisions in our society such as black-white, blue collar-white collar, liberal-conservative, and (more recently) red-blue, we recognize divisions having a *geographic* basis—such as North-South, East-West, urban-rural, and urban-suburban. A new, and rather different sort of geographic division is emerging, however. As Matt Taibbi notes, in concluding in his detailed—and typically brilliant—“[*Greed and Debt: The True Story of Mitt Romney and Bain Capital: How the GOP presidential candidate and his private equity firm staged an epic wealth grab, destroyed jobs – and stuck others with the bill*](#),” what’s emerging is the “nowhere” sort of person (such as Mitt Rhombney). The sort of person who has no particular attachment to any particular local area—or even country.

The emergence of this sort of person has importance because this new “breed” of person is not a hermit-like individual who isolates himself or herself from the rest of the world. Rather, this sort of person plays an active role in world society, but does so in a manner destined to result in conflict with those of us who are “somewhere” people. As Taibbi says regarding this likely conflict:

It will be between people who consider themselves citizens of actual countries, to which they have patriotic allegiance, and people to whom nations are meaningless, who live in a stateless global archipelago of privilege—a collection of private schools, tax havens and gated residential communities with little or no connection to the outside world.

I should add that Taibbi, in asserting regarding these “nowhere” people, that they have “little or no connection to the outside world,” he means that their *social contacts* are primarily with other “nowhere” people rather than “somewhere” ones. From whence derives the conflict, then, that Taibbi says will emerge between these two groups of people? The fact that those in the “nowhere” group are gaining control over the world’s finances, and for that reason represent a threat to those of us “99%” people who are “somewhere” persons. A threat to us because their financial manipulations are carried on for their *own* benefit—thereby causing harm to the rest of us. Most of those in this group are content to carry on their machinations quietly, but Rhombney is an unusual member of this group in that he craves the limelight—a choice that forces him to be a pathological liar (a role that he seems to fill with ease).

To use ecological language, members of this group are *parasites*—not just of individual *societies* but of Human Society *per se*. Whereas members of the elite in the past often performed useful tasks while “screwing” people (Mitt’s father, George, comes to mind—except for the “screwing” part), members of this emerging elite are *pure* parasites—although they may claim for themselves the roles of, e.g., “job savers,” and even “job creators.” Perhaps they make positive claims about themselves so that they can live with themselves, hiding from themselves the fact that they are despicable creatures. The unfortunate fact about this, however, is that this country is loaded with ignorant, misinformed people who are all too eager to believe the lies of the likes of Rhomney. (In many cases I suspect that their support for Rhomney is tepid, and exists primarily because of a barely suppressed racist attitude toward President [O’Bomber](#).)

Taibbi says of Rhombney—to whom he gives the label “archipelago man”:

Romney is the frontman and apostle of an economic revolution, in which transactions are manufactured instead of products, wealth is generated without accompanying prosperity, and Cayman Islands partnerships are lovingly erected and nurtured while American communities fall apart. The entire purpose of the business model that Romney helped pioneer is to move money into the archipelago from the places outside it, using massive amounts of taxpayer-subsidized debt to enrich a handful of billionaires. It's a vision of society that's crazy, vicious and almost unbelievably selfish, yet it's running for president [in the person of Mitt Rhombney], and it has a chance of winning. Perhaps that change is coming whether we like it or not.

Taibbi notes that *because* Rhombney is an “archipelago” man, his approval rating has remained low, despite the fact that millions of dollars—some of it his own—have been poured into his campaign:

[The fact that he is a “nowhere” person is] a big reason that voters have been slow to warm up to him. From LBJ to Bill Clinton to George W. Bush to Sarah Palin, Americans like their politicians to sound like they're from somewhere, to be human symbols of our love affair with small towns, the girl next door, the little pink houses of [John] Mellencamp myth. Most of those mythical American towns grew up around factories—think chocolate bars from Hershey, baseball bats from Louisville, cereals from Battle Creek. Deep down, what scares voters in both parties the most is the thought that these unique and vital places are vanishing or eroding—overrun by immigrants or the forces of globalism or both, with giant Walmarts descending like spaceships to replace the corner grocer, the family barber and the local hardware store, and 1,000 cable channels replacing the school dance and the gossip at the local diner.

It’s deeply ironic that someone so unlike most people that one knows—an individual so difficult to relate to, because he is more humanoid than human—is the presidential candidate for one of our major political parties! But the FCM—i.e., fawning corporate media—keeps the mass of the population ignorant, Rhombney has financial backers with seemingly bottomless pockets, and much of the antipathy for O’Bomber seems to be based more on the fact that he is black than on

the policies that he has pursued (regarding [public education](#), for example) Thus, it's entirely conceivable that Rhombney will be elected president!

The larger concern here, though, is the fact we are becoming pawns in a game being played by “nowhere” people—puppets whose strings are being operated by members of the “nowhere” crowd. And the question that arises relative to this problem is: What can—and should—we “somewhere” people do about this ominous trend?

In providing *my* answer to this question, I would first note that this trend is not the *only* one of importance occurring currently. An even more important trend is that of global warming, for that phenomenon threatens our very continued existence as a species; and the point that I wish to make here is that there is a serendipitous solution to both problems—a solution that, if implemented, has the potential of addressing both problems simultaneously.

My starting point here is to recognize that the “progress” of global warming is likely to be such that a “tipping point” will be reached “soon”—in, at most, a few decades. *That* fact has two implications:

- Once that point is reached, the negative phenomena associated with global warming are likely to become ever more intense—and at an increasing rate.
- We are beyond the point where global warming can be halted—or reduced to the point that the danger of reaching, and surpassing, the tipping point can be averted.

The second fact has particular importance, because it suggests—very clearly, in fact—that it would be foolish to engage in efforts to slow, or stop, global warming—for the simple reason that such efforts would be doomed to failure. The only viable course of action is one of *adaptation*—engaging in those activities calculated to (possibly) “save” us from the ravages of global warming.

In previous essays I have commented on what adaptation could, and should, entail, thus I will eschew commentary on that matter here. The points that I would like to emphasize here are that:

- The fact that the “nowhere” people among us are parasites on the one hand means that their “job” is screwing us—but their *doing* so means that they are *dependent* on us for their existence: Any parasite is dependent for its existence on a “host.”
- If the adaptation efforts engaged in by “somewhere” folk are directed toward *self-sufficiency*, the eventual effect will be to “starve the beast.” That is, if members of the “somewhere” group remove themselves from the Existing Order, and interact economically just with other “somewhere” people who have also removed themselves,

this withdrawal will mean that a process of “dehostification” has been set in motion. A process that, if joined by enough “somewhere” ‘people, will reduce the support of “nowhere” people—perhaps to the point of complete non-support. They will then have been “conquered,” but not in a battle in the usual sense.

It would be foolish to engage in efforts designed to combat “nowhere” people via the *political* process. Not only would this approach fail, but would do nothing to “save” one from the ravages of global warming. The approach identified above, however, has the potential of “killing two birds with one stone.” It is the only approach that makes sense to me—and I hope that more will begin to see the merits of that approach.

Interestingly, in several previous essays I have criticized Chris Hedges for promoting protest efforts. His recent “[Growth is the Problem](#)” column, however, seemingly indicates that Hedges has finally come to “see the light.” Not only does he seem to have abandoned the notion that resistance, in the form of protests, is a useful exercise; he seems to realize that the answer lies with adaptation. Unlike me, he does not call for the creation of a New Society, but has at least moved *somewhat* in that direction. It’s good to see religious people (his father was a Presbyterian minister, and he has a divinity degree from Harvard) become “converted”!

The Most Intelligent Species?!

Alton C. Thompson

Here is a portion of a [recent article](#):

The dramatic melting of arctic ice sheets and glaciers caused by climate change is creating a new—and experts warn dangerous—race for oil, gas, and mineral reserves previously not accessible to the world's largest and most powerful countries.

And, as Elisabeth Rosenthal reports for the *New York Times*, the race for those resources is setting in motion a geopolitical chess match that plays world powers against one another and puts once isolated communities and outposts at the center of an emerging story about how the Arctic's natural treasures will be managed and by whom.

Let me get this straight: Our burning of fossil fuels over the past 250 years has been resulting in an accumulation of “greenhouse” gases in the atmosphere, and the resulting increased “greenhouse effect” is resulting in increased warming. One effect of this warming is that within a few years, the arctic will be [ice-free](#) during the summer.

There are two ways that we could respond to the news that the arctic’s ice is disappearing:

- This is *great* news because it means that the oil and natural gas underground in this part of the world can soon be accessed, and therefore help supply our growing need for oil and natural gas to continue to “power” our civilization.
- This is *terrible* news, for the disappearance of that ice is another signal that we are about to reach, and cross, a crucial “tipping point”—after which heating will accelerate, and “all hell will break loose.” (See Fred Pearce’s [With Speed and Violence: Why Scientists Fear Tipping Points in Climate Change](#), 2008, for example.)

Those who perceive this as *great* news are members of our species who have not only a short-run orientation, but an orientation to short-run profits for *themselves*. For such people, there is no such thing as “long run;” there is only one short-run after another, with one short-run being virtually identical to any other short-run.

Those who perceive this as *terrible* news, in contrast, tend to be:

- Employees rather than business owners.
- Individuals who strive to not allow their thinking be captured by an ideology.

- Individuals for whom the possession of material things has little meaning.
- Individuals with liberal arts educations.

In short, people whose position in society, education, and value system is such that they can—and do—recognize that our species is in dire straits at present. That, in fact, the “progress” of global warming has reached such a point that:

- Ameliorative efforts *per se* are doomed to fail.
- Efforts to be “green” by individuals will have no effect in preventing “tipping points” from being reached.
- Given these facts, the only option that can be pursued with any hope that it will “work” is that of adaptation.

Unfortunately, such people are not present in leadership positions, here or elsewhere (which fact should not be surprising, as I will be suggesting shortly)!

Fortunately, though, [attention](#) is increasingly being given to the strategy of *adaptation*. The question that arises regarding those efforts, however, is: How *intelligent* are they? For example, take the following as a fairly comprehensive discussion (the outline of which is presented below):

- [7 Methods of adaptation](#)
 - [7.1 Enhancing adaptive capacity](#)
 - [7.2 Adaptation through local planning](#)
 - [7.3 Agricultural production](#)
 - [7.3.1 Drought tolerant crop varieties](#)
 - [7.3.2 More spending on irrigation](#)
 - [7.3.3 Rainwater storage](#)
 - [7.4 Weather control](#)
 - [7.5 Damming glacial lakes](#)
 - [7.6 Geoengineering](#)
 - [7.7 Assisting disadvantaged nations](#)
 - [7.8 Migration](#)

I have two complaints regarding such efforts. In the first place, they don’t seem to take global warming as *seriously* as they should. They don’t seem to recognize the *speed* at which changes could begin to occur in atmospheric conditions—changes which would quickly impact our

society. For example, food scarcities could become acute very quickly, resulting in a terrific loss of population via starvation and disease, with those sudden losses in population *themselves* contributing to further losses—because people involved in doing certain vital tasks are culled, and thereby no longer to perform their vital tasks. Global warming, we need to remind ourselves, is a process that will “feed upon itself”—and *not* just regarding atmospheric conditions.

If one problem with the efforts identified above is that they may amount to “too little, too late”—i.e., they are not likely to be particularly *effective*—another problem is that they are extremely *narrow in their scope*: They all tacitly assume, first, that societal problems are isolated one from another, and that, second, the only problem that needs to be addressed at present is that of global warming.

In my opinion, a much broader perspective is needed—one that recognizes that global warming is a serious problem, true, but the sort of problem that our sort of society would be *expected* to experience, because it is the *nature of the society itself* that has *produced* the problem. That is, global warming is not a problem that is “just happening” to us—a problem that can be somehow isolated from the nature of our society. Rather, it is an *integral part* of our society; and given that fact, what must be done is not to address the problem of global warming in isolation from our society’s other problems, but to recognize that the fundamental problem is that our society itself is *sick*—as [Richard G. Wilkinson](#) has suggested. Inequality may or may not be the fundamental reason why our society is sick; but I agree with Wilkinson that it certainly is a major *contributing* factor.

The main point that I wish to make here, however, is that we need to not only adapt to the effects of global warming that have already manifested themselves, but do so in a manner that addresses the root cause of why global warming is occurring—the fact that we live in a sick society that is growing ever sicker.

The proper response to the disappearance of arctic ice that I referred to at the beginning is to begin to create a New Society to replace the crappy one of which we are now inmates. Would that someone would arise—*more* than one, in fact—to provide the leadership necessary to prevent us from returning to a Stone Age existence. When I say “us” I mean just “*some* of us,” of course, given the likelihood (as stated by British climate scientist [Kevin Anderson](#)) that by 2060 CE very few of us (if anyone!) will be alive.

The prospects of a New Society arising seem rather dim, however—a fact that makes it difficult for me to get to sleep at night, given that I have four grandchildren.

[October 16, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/10/16/opposition-to-global-warming/>]

Opposition to Global Warming Measures

Alton C. Thompson

Claims Michael Scherer in the current (October 1, 2012) issue of *Time* magazine (“Coal, Hard Truths,” p. 30):

The battle over the U.S.’s energy future is one of the clearest choices presented to voters in the 2012 campaign. In his 2011 State of the Union address, [President] Obama dismissed oil companies as purveyors of “yesterday’s energy.” Now many of those same companies have joined with the nation’s coal magnates to pour money and ground troops into the election, determined to make Obama yesterday’s President. Industry ads promoting coal, oil, and gas and often attacking Obama’s vaunted clean energy as a boondoggle have filled the airwaves in swing states. And some of the biggest names in the business have been getting off the sidelines to take a public stand against the President.

It is understandable why Robert E. Murray—who heads Murray Energy Corporation (which operates three coal mines in southeastern Ohio)—refers to Barack Obama as “Bear-ick.” Murray sees in Mitt Rhombney no threat to his livelihood, but *does* perceive such a threat in O’Bomber. Being innocent of politics, Murray doesn’t realize that O’Bomber and Rhombney have much in common. As [Chris Hedges](#) stated recently (among other things):

We have to look at what they [i.e., politicians] do and what Obama does is serve the centers of power, I think one could argue, in many ways more efficiently than [did the second George] Bush. You talk about energy and Obama has expanded drilling. He has supported half of the XL pipeline and I have a pretty good suspicion that once he’s elected, he’ll build the other half.

O’Bomber is as much about serving the interests of the elite as is Rhomney. Thus, although O’Bomber may *campaign* for “clean” energy, this does not mean that he is any more of a *promoter* of it than is Rhombney. What each candidate says in his campaign speeches is designed to attract a certain segment of voters—with the main difference between O’Bomber and Rhombney being that the latter tries to appeal to *everybody* (while in his *private* speeches demonstrating his utter cluelessness—e.g., his recent [“47%” comments](#)).

If O’Bomber were trying to attract votes in southeastern Ohio, he would be presenting them with a jobs plan for when the coal mines closed down. But his interest in full employment is no more sincere than is Rhombney’s (despite what a [recent column](#) by Paul Krugman might seem to suggest). Rather, his interest is in being *re-elected*, so that he can continue to serve the interests of his masters, the elite/Wall Street. (which one would never guess, though, from reading Scherer’s article!).

Murray, per Scherer, “rejects the threat of global warming as bad science. Murray says he is motivated by one thing—preserving the livelihoods of his workers from the ‘Hollywood characters, unionists and wealthy elitists’ who oppose dirtier forms of energy.” But does Murray *really* object to efforts to address global warming because they are based on “bad science” or, rather, because the closing of his coal mines would mean a loss of his livelihood? It’s doubtful that Murray knows enough about the science involved to make a competent assessment of whether or not it’s “bad”—which leaves us with *his own* explanation for why he opposes efforts to address global warming: Closing down his mines would put many out of work, and devastate the local economy.

Perhaps Murray is one of those rare employers who *is* genuinely concerned about the well-being of his employees, but it’s more plausible to believe that he perceives his mines as “cash cows” for *himself*. And although his attitude toward O’Bomber is understandable, it’s also clear that Murray is unable to see the “big picture”—in two ways:

- In paying more attention to O’Bombers *words* than his *deeds*, he fails to see that O’Bomber likely is no more a threat to his livelihood than is Rhombney. It’s even conceivable that were the Rhombney–Ruin team to be elected, the economy would take a nosedive that would affect *his own* operations—and rather quickly.
- He is honestly unaware, apparently, that global warming *is*, indeed, a real threat—the sort of threat that could result in the collapse of our society within a few years or decades. Which collapse, by the way, *would* likely result in the forced closure of his mines.

Businessmen, such as Robert E. Murray (or the Koch brothers—William, David, and Charles), who have been pouring tons of money into attempts to make O’Bomber a one-term president have, on the one hand, exaggerated the differences between Rhombney and O’Bomber. On the other hand, however, they have failed to realize how *irresponsible* they are being in putting short-run profits over the long-run implications of global warming; and how *foolish* they are being in not recognizing that their own *businesses* will soon be threatened by global warming. They *claim* to be against measures to address global warming because such measures are based on “bad science” and would have ruinous implications for employment, were they to be implemented. More plausibly, however, they are against such measures because they simply can’t think beyond the short run—short-run profits for *themselves*, specifically.

What Murray’s reference to “bad science” indicates is that energy-company businessmen have not only been lavishing huge amounts of money on candidates who they do not perceive as a threat, but also on “think tanks.” The “intellectuals” who work for right-wing “think tanks” welcome this money, of course—but not for the reason that the businessmen may think. As Naomi Klein (author of [*The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*](#)) pointed out in a

[recent article](#), it should first be noted that the efforts of these “intellectuals” to spread the propaganda that climate science is a “hoax” has been effective with the general public:

A 2007 Harris poll found that 71 percent of Americans believed that the continued burning of fossil fuels would cause the climate to change. By 2009 the figure had dropped to 51 percent. In June 2011 the number of Americans who agreed was down to 44 percent—well under half the population. According to Scott Keeter, director of survey research at the Pew Research Center for People and the Press, this is “among the largest shifts over a short period of time seen in recent public opinion history.”

And:

Equally significant has been a shift in emotional intensity. Climate change used to be something most everyone said they cared about—just not all that much. When Americans were asked to rank their political concerns in order of priority, climate change would reliably come in last.

Why would highly-educated people—such as those who work for right-wing “think tanks”—prostitute themselves by arguing—and supposedly “demonstrating”—that climate science is a “hoax”? Here’s what Klein has to say about the matter:

All of this [i.e., shift in viewpoints] means that the climate movement needs to have one hell of a comeback. For this to happen, the left is going to have to learn from the right. Denialists gained traction by making climate about economics: action will destroy capitalism, they have claimed, killing jobs and sending prices soaring. But at a time when a growing number of people agree with the protesters at Occupy Wall Street, many of whom argue that capitalism-as-usual is itself the cause of lost jobs and debt slavery, there is a unique opportunity to seize the economic terrain from the right. This would require making a persuasive case that the real solutions to the climate crisis are also our best hope of building a much more enlightened economic system—one that closes deep inequalities, strengthens and transforms the public sphere, generates plentiful, dignified work and radically reins in corporate power. It would also require a shift away from the notion that climate action is just one issue on a laundry list of worthy causes vying for progressive attention. Just as climate denialism has become a core identity issue on the right, utterly entwined with defending current systems of power and wealth, the scientific reality of climate change must, for progressives, occupy a central place in a coherent narrative about the perils of unrestrained greed and the need for real alternatives.

That is, some “intellectuals” in our society are so “possessed” by their fixation on Capitalism that they are simply unable to admit that global warming is occurring, and engage in efforts to “disprove” its occurrence and/or argue that efforts to address it would mean job losses—as if they really care about the well-being of working-class people! Unfortunately, as Klein notes, the false claims of these “intellectuals” are not being countered very effectively.

Klein goes on to state:

The fact that the earth's atmosphere cannot safely absorb the amount of carbon we are pumping into it is a symptom of a much larger crisis, one born of the central fiction on which our economic model is based: that nature is limitless, that we will always be able to find more of what we need, and that if something runs out it can be seamlessly replaced by another resource that we can endlessly extract. But it is not just the atmosphere that we have exploited beyond its capacity to recover—we are doing the same to the oceans, to freshwater, to topsoil and to biodiversity. The expansionist, extractive mindset, which has so long governed our relationship to nature, is what the climate crisis calls into question so fundamentally. The abundance of scientific research showing we have pushed nature beyond its limits does not just demand green products and market-based solutions; it demands a new civilizational paradigm, one grounded not in dominance over nature but in respect for natural cycles of renewal—and acutely sensitive to natural limits, including the limits of human intelligence.

Klein is right in arguing that we need a “new civilizational paradigm, one grounded not in dominance over nature but in respect for natural cycles of renewal—and acutely sensitive to natural limits, including the limits of human intelligence.” And I would interpret this as saying that we need a *New Society* (something that *she* does not say, however). That is, what I perceive in Klein's statement is recognition that the Existing Order cannot be “reformed,” so that the creation of a New Society is the only answer.

What I would add to Klein's conclusion is that what right-wing “intellectuals” don't seem to realize is that capitalistic civilization *will* go “down the tubes” whether they want it to or not—and regardless of how much ink they spill. Nature will have its way with us within a matter of years, and we can either just wait for that to happen, and suffer the consequences, or we can plan now to create a New Society within the shell of the Existing Order—a New Society that on the one hand is built to survive global warming (insofar as that is possible), and on the other hand is designed to be livable.

Let us hope that at least *some* in our midst recognize the importance of the New Society option, and begin building it. Else, it's highly likely that whatever humans are living in 2100 CE will have a Stone Age-level existence—if they exist at all, that is!

William McCord, in discussing ([*Voyages to Utopia: From Monastery to Commune : The Search for the Perfect Society in Modern Times*](#), 1989) the Israeli kibbutz experience refers (p. 49) to “the lure of the ‘world’” as a problem for maintaining kibbutzes as going concerns—and I assume that this problem has always plagued the New Society movement over the centuries. The current situation, however, is unique in that the Larger Society will soon be disintegrating—so that rather than people wanting to leave the New Society movement for the “world,” people will want to become a part of the New Society movement for their survival. Thus, never in history has the New Society movement had a better chance for success than today. Which is fortunate for the sake of our species!

[<http://www.climatechronicle.com/2012/09/adaptation-will-cause-problems/>]

[<http://www.newsgrape.com/a/C5mxDeEuMR4qXpozasoqrg/global-warming-will-adaptation-cause-problems/>]

<http://bravenewworld.in/2012/10/19/global-warming-will-adaptation-cause-problems/>

Adaptation Will Cause Problems?

Alton C. Thompson

Adaptation to atmospheric conditions occurs at different *time scales*. For example, one may watch television before one retires at night to learn the weather forecast for the following day—so that one can plan how one will adapt to the atmospheric conditions expected for the next day: What weight of clothing to wear, whether one will need to wear a jacket (and, if so, what weight), whether one will need to carry an umbrella, etc.

What I have just referred to is a *very short* time scale. A *longer* time scale would involve purchasing or renting housing—not just as a locale for certain of one’s activities, but for protection from precipitation and temperature conditions (if, i.e., the housing is supplied with a furnace and/or air conditioning).

On a *day-to-day* basis it may be difficult to determine how one will adapt to weather conditions the next day—which is why one watches, or listens to, weather reports. On an *annual* basis, however, there has been more predictability in the *seasons*—which fact has made the concept “climate” a meaningful one. In recent years, however (2012 being an excellent example), “climate change” has become noticeable—and notable. In fact, what *research* regarding “climate change” suggests is that “climate,” as a concept is losing its *referent* (i.e., that to which it refers). That is, the referent (in this case a complex of atmospheric conditions) is changing in a way that is making the very *concept* “climate” ever more meaningless.

Why claim that? What “global warming” involves is not just a *trend*, from a global standpoint, in an increase in the global mean temperature, but weather conditions that are increasingly abnormal: Erratic, and therefore more and more unpredictable. *That* fact is my basis for saying that “climate” is fading away as a meaningful concept—so that “climate change” itself is a misleading term (which is why, in an [earlier essay](#), I suggested “trendular atmospheric depatternization”—TAD—as a substitute).

With TAD we have a still different—a *longer*—time scale, from an adaptation standpoint, and if we are thinking about *how* we will adapt to TAD, we may have in mind a period of time down the road 20 years or more, and would need to ask ourselves:

- Can I adapt on an *in situ* basis (i.e., one not requiring that I move), and if so, specifically *what* do I need to do to adapt to the atmospheric situation that I anticipate at that future period of time?
- If I will need to move (because, e.g., I live near the coast, and the ocean will be rising), *where* should I move, and *what* sorts of adaptive activities will I need to engage in at that new location?

As I have addressed these matters in earlier essays, I will focus on a different matter relative to adaptation in this essay. In doing so, let me begin by noting that there are two different approaches to TAD:

- Efforts at *mitigation*—activities having the purpose of trying to stop, or at least slow, further warming by, e.g., (a) reducing the emission of “greenhouse” gases, (b) reducing the flow of [insolation](#) to earth, (c) sequestration of carbon, and (d) developing “carbon sinks.”
- *Adaptation*—engaging in activities that will allow one (one hopes!) to survive the atmospheric changes that will be occurring, there being no attempt to affect those atmospheric changes.

The problem with mitigation efforts is that we may be very close to a “[tipping point](#)”—so near, quite possibly, that the “inertia” present in TAD will cause that tipping point to be reached, and passed, within a few years. Given this very real possibility, it appears that our only real option is that of adaptation. In earlier essays I discussed the matter of *what* one might do to adapt. In this essay, however, I address a very different matter related to adaptation—the possibility that efforts at adaptation might actually *contribute* to the problem of TAD!

Several articles have appeared recently concerning this matter, including Will R. Turner, *et al.*, “[Climate Change: Helping Nature Survive the Human Response](#),” Bryan Walsh, “[Climate Change: How Adapting to Warming Could Make it Worse](#),” (an article that draws heavily from the Turner article), and Michael Oppenheimer, “[Climate Change Impacts: Accounting for the Human Response](#).” Using Walsh’s article as my basic source, the following adaptive efforts can be identified as possibly presenting problems. (I should note that the focus of these articles is on how adaptation efforts affect *biodiversity*, and that the adaptation efforts referred to tend to be ones directed by *governmental units* rather than private individuals/organizations.)

1. The use of corn to produce ethanol (for use as a fuel) has resulted “losses of grassland habitats in the [Conservation Reserve program](#), while some of the fertilizer used to grow that corn eventually washes out in the Gulf of Mexico, feeding dangerous dead zones.”

Besides, “there’s growing doubt that first-generation biofuels [such as ethanol] cut carbon [emissions] significantly.”

2. Although hydroelectric power is a “very low-carbon renewable energy, . . . massive dams can cause ecological problems of their own.”—China’s “massive [Three Gorges Dam](#)” being an example.
3. Las Vegas, Nevada, has proposed “a massive series of pipelines that would bring groundwater from the valleys of eastern Nevada to the booming desert city.” This project, if implemented, “will likely damage species and ecosystems in the area.”
4. Stressed regions such as southern Africa “may experience substantial declines in crop productivity in just a few decades.” And as “existing farmlands dry up, refugees will seek to colonize wild territories—seriously impacting biodiversity as protected areas are converted into cropland.” Unfortunately, “much of that new land—like high-elevation areas of East Africa and parts of western Russia—are biodiversity hotspots.
5. As sea levels rise, people living in coastal areas will be forced to move inland. Unfortunately, when “people migrate away from the coasts to escape the rising seas, expect them to use those forests [in the areas into which they are likely to move] for fuel and clear them for farming. That could be devastating for biodiversity—nearly half of the [Alliance for Zero Extinction](#) hotspots exist within this zone.”
6. With the melting of Arctic sea ice, new shipping lanes will be opened, and this will “increase the possibility of expanded offshore oil and gas exploration. The far North has been largely untouched by human beings—the presence of heavy shipping and energy infrastructure could wreak havoc on wildlife that will already be coming under threat directly from warmer temperatures. And that’s without a devastating oil spill.”

Walsh concludes his discussion by stating: “The lesson here isn’t that human beings can’t adapt to climate change without adding to the destruction created by . . . climate change. It’s that adaptation will only work if it’s well-planned for the long-term, and if it takes into account impacts on wildlife and nature as well as on human beings . . .” Walsh then quotes from the Turner *et al.* article: “Increased research focus on the indirect effects of climate change, coupled with expanded support for biodiversity conservation, will ultimately lead to better policies and programs dealing with global climate change.”

Some comments:

1. As I suggested earlier, use of the term “climate change” suggests that what will be happening is that there will still be *climates*, but that climatologists will need to re-make their maps periodically to show how the positions of climate regions have shifted. Such a

suggestion ignores the fact that one of the more important features of what will be occurring is increased *variability* in atmospheric conditions for any given location—so that a point will be reached where no areas will even *have* a “climate”! This will present severe problems for anyone trying to adapt to changing conditions, for crop failures will become not only increasingly *routine*, but increasingly *severe*. *Because* of this, starvation and disease are likely to become major “cullers” of the human population. (As I have noted in previous essays, British climate scientist Kevin Anderson projects that by 2060 about 90% of the earth’s population will be culled by “global warming.”) There is a real *urgency* associated with adaptation, and simply engaging in “further research” rather than adaptive actions amounts to “[fiddling while Rome burns](#).”

2. Note in the sentence quoted from the Turner *et al.* article the use of the word “ultimately” and the phrase “policies and programs.” The word ultimately suggests that we can approach “global warming” in a leisurely fashion, as if we had “all the time in the world.” Use of that term ignores the very real possibility of a “tipping point” being reached within a matter of years (or decades, at most), after which change will become rapid—as the process of change begins to “feed upon itself” (i.e., positive feedback mechanisms kick in).

Also, the reference to “policies and programs” assumes that adaptive efforts will—must?—be initiated and directed by (national) *governments*. My response to this assumption is that it is unbelievably naïve and foolish, because most politicians seem to be “in the pockets” of energy company executives—whose interest is in more drilling and mining, rather than adapting to “global warming.” Given that governments are *not* likely to provide the necessary leadership, we as individuals and as leaders of private organizations (such as religious ones, foundations, etc.) need to engage in activities designed to “save” *ourselves* from the ravages of “global warming.”

3. Following the quote from the article by Turner *et al.* Walsh states that “the only problem [with waiting for “better policies and programs”] is that it’s our inability to plan well for the long-term that has led us to the climate crisis—and there’s no evidence that has changed, even as the impacts of warming become harder and harder to deny.” To assert that our current “climate crisis” has resulted from an inability to plan for the long term is to assume that the economic and other developments that have occurred in a society have been done under governmental leadership. Such might be true in some countries, but certainly has not been true in the United States—where economic interests are the dog that wags the government tail, and the concern of *those* interests has been with short-term profits, Earth be damned.
4. Walsh’s statement: “Human influence on the planet will shift as we adapt to warming—and we may end up doing even more damage to the Earth than climate change itself.”

The implication of this statement—it would seem—is that we should make no effort to adapt because in doing so will be damaging Earth—more than it has already been. He can't be serious in making this statement! Unless we want our species to go the way of the dinosaurs, it is incumbent upon us to try to adapt to the changes that will be inevitably occurring. Of course, in doing so we should strive to minimize our impact on biodiversity. But given that (per Kevin Anderson) most of the world's population is likely to be culled by "global warming" within the next few decades, that drastic reduction in the earth's population will *in itself* result in a diminishment in the impact that humans have on biodiversity.

5. Most of the six points listed above concern activities being engaged in either at present or in the near-term future. Given that—as I suggested earlier—plans for adaptation should be looking "down the road" to a period 20 years or more into the future, I find most of those points to have little or no relevance for the time period of most importance.
6. Nothing in those comments is helpful for those private citizens (as individuals or leaders of private organizations) desiring to engage in adaptive behaviors. One gets the impression that the authors are neither aware of how *serious* a threat—and how *soon*—is posed by "global warming," nor are aware that *they* will be affected by atmospheric changes just as much as the rest of us are. They give the impression that their interest is in providing a basis for *further research* by themselves—as if the situation in a few years won't be so chaotic that they will be forced to think about how they are going to *survive* rather than engaging in research! Where are their brains?!
7. It is perhaps understandable why the scholars associated with the Turner article, for example, have a focus on biodiversity—*that's* where their research interest lies. What's curious, however, is how they can have such concern when their own professions—even their lives!—are being threatened by "global warming." One would think that they would realize how odd their views are, given the situation that we humans find ourselves in today.

A Summary of My Perspective^[1]

Alton C. Thompson

[You may find what I write here depressing—I certainly do! I have come to conclude—and so state at the end of the essay—that our situation is virtually hopeless, for the reasons I cite at the end of this essay. Despite that belief on my part, I intend to continue to do what I can to address this problem—for I can’t let my four grandchildren down, if I can help it.]

In concluding a [recent essay](#), I identified a book—[After Collapse: The Regeneration of Complex Societies](#), edited by Glenn M. Schwartz and John J. Nichols—that I planned to add to my reading list. Since then, I have borrowed a copy of the book through the local library, and started to read Chapter 1 (“From Collapse to Regeneration,” by Glenn M. Schwartz, pp. 3 – 17). Doing so was a chore, however, for I found myself unable to become interested in what Schwartz had to say, and instead found my mind drifting to thoughts about how I might summarize my perspective—as developed to this point. I therefore abandoned *After Collapse*, and made an effort, rather, to develop a summary of my thinking, as it stands at the moment. What follows, then, is that summary, presented as a logical argument:

1. Humans are on the verge of facing a challenge unprecedented for our species—that of reaching, and passing, a “[tipping point](#)” relative to “[climate](#).” A “tipping point,” in this case, is a point where the negative feedback mechanisms that had been “working” to maintain relative stability in atmospheric conditions from year to year begin to give way to [positive feedback](#) mechanisms—which then act to bring about rapid changes in response to the increased heating of earth—commonly referred to as “global warming” or “climate change.” [2]. The “rapid changes” in this case will include (a) an increase the mean temperature of earth, (b) an increase in the number of storms, (c) an increase in the severity of storms, and (d) increased variability—and thus unpredictability—in weather conditions (including the occurrence of droughts, heavy precipitation, and strong winds) (That passing a “tipping point” with climate is a serious matter is dealt with well by, e.g., Fred Pearce in his [With Speed and Violence: Why Scientists Fear Tipping Points in Climate Change](#).)
2. The challenge that we will be facing is *of our own making*—our burning of fossil fuels since about 1750 CE (which results in transferring carbon that had been safely locked away under the earth’s surface to the atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide—CO₂—thereby adding to the “[greenhouse effect](#).”) I should note that the fact that earth *has* a

greenhouse effects enables life to exist on earth; it is the *increase* in that effect, resulting from our burning of fossil fuels, that is the problem.

3. The “tipping point” referred to above will most probably be reached in a few years—or, at most, a few decades.
4. Reaching, and passing, the “climatic” tipping point will cause *other* tipping points to be reached in nature (relative to vegetation, insects, animals, etc.).
5. The primary significance, for us humans, of reaching and passing various tipping points is that the changes thereby induced will cause human societies to collapse within a matter of decades.
6. The collapse of societies means that virtually all existing economic activities will cease, as will many other activities (e.g., professional sports, entertainment, musical groups, churches, [3] etc.).[4] To a degree, people—those who survive, that is!—will have some choice as to what to retain from the Old Culture; basically, however, the atmospheric changes will be such as to cause most existing activities to cease.
7. As “global warming” occurs and (as a consequence) societies begin to collapse, there will be a tremendous loss of life. (For example, climate scientist [Kevin Anderson](#)—an advisor to the British government—projects that by 2060 CE 90% of the world’s population will be culled in one way or another by global warming [5] (one implication of this tremendous loss of life being that most existing buildings will become vacant). Once the initial chaos has passed (i.e., after a few decades), the survivors will be able to gain a certain degree of stability, but erratic atmospheric conditions will remain a challenge for decades, if not centuries.
8. Given these very real possibilities (that societies will be collapsing, and most of the world’s population will be culled), we should use our (claimed!) intelligence to *anticipate* societal collapse—and begin thinking *now* about what we will do about the prospect of future—*near* future, I would emphasize—societal collapse and population decimation.
9. *Mitigation* efforts (i.e., efforts to prevent further warming) will not prevent the occurrence of reaching, and passing, a climate tipping point.
10. Given that fact, the only option facing us is that of *adaptation*.
11. Governments will not provide significant leadership relative to adaptation (an easy conclusion to make, if one observes “our” wonderful politicians during this election season). If anything, they will be a *hindrance*!
12. Adaptation efforts must have two objectives:

- a. Coping with the atmospheric (and other) changes that will be occurring (“other” here including a rising sea level, the increased likelihood of crop losses, insect infestations, “killer” floods, etc.)
 - b. Providing for survivors—i.e., *as many survivors as possible*—a decent life. I would define the latter as a relatively egalitarian way of life that accords well with our “design specifications” as human beings. (For the latter, see my [What Are Churches For?](#)) Whereas the writers for the aforementioned *After Collapse* implicitly value “complexity,”[6] they make no effort to justify that implicit value judgment—perhaps because they sense that it is indefensible! Adaptation efforts that fail to address this second point are not worth taking, in my opinion—for life is not worth living unless it is truly worth living.
13. Given that adaptation efforts must be engaged in by *private* individuals (because of the lack of any governmental leadership), it can occur in two ways:
 - a. Individuals and households choosing to homestead.
 - b. Individuals forming—or joining [existing](#)—communities, those communities assumed to be as self-sufficient as possible from an economic (i.e., sustenance) standpoint.
14. The second of the above two options is the preferable one (in my opinion).
15. However, because few such communities exist at present, a program must be instituted to establish more and more such communities. (The Amish are one of the few groups that may be “pre-adapted” to the atmospheric changes that lie ahead—more so than the rest of us, at any rate.)
16. This will require (a) people with the necessary knowledge to provide leadership, and (b) financial assistance to enable them to proceed.
17. Initial communities should be small, and [not allowed to exceed 500](#) in population size.
18. A given community should develop internal institutions that would enable it to become a “family of families.” (See my “[Why Our Society Has Become So Inegalitarian](#)” for some thoughts regarding this.)
19. The Structured Interaction Group (SIG; see my previously-cited *What Are Churches For?* should be used for decision making—both for the initial planning of communities, and their “operation” once created.

20. Once a community-creating movement is underway, some of those who have developed experience with community living, and have leadership ability, should proceed to launch new communities.
21. As a proliferation of communities occurs, this will enable some economic specialization to occur with individual communities, with consequent exchange between nearby communities.
22. Because I expect that there would be a de-valuing of material things in these communities (unlike the existing society!), the amount of such trade would be minimal.
23. Specialized tasks are likely to develop, and an effort should be made to rotate people through those tasks—but only for those interested in so doing. An effort should be made to *utilize* the abilities of all members of a community, and to encourage individual members to *expand* their abilities.
24. It's likely that when a community movement becomes well underway, groupings of communities will develop for certain purposes—perhaps even several “layers” of such groupings. The boundaries of such groupings are likely to be rather permeable—and to have little relationship with existing boundaries.
25. Communication between communities, however, *would* be valued and would occur frequently—and electronically, especially (if, that is, the infrastructure then existing will support this).
26. Physical travel would be primarily for personal enjoyment rather than for business.
27. Would these communities become vulnerable? This is an important question, and “vulnerability” has two facets. On the one hand, as the society begins to collapse, there will be many desperate people; unless communities are located far enough away from major urban areas, these desperate people can pose a threat to a community's continued existence. Thus, even though an effort should be made to include as many people as possible in an adaptation movement, members of the movement must recognize that their ability to provide support to others will be limited—meaning that they cannot accommodate all of the desperate people “out there” that there will be. Millions will die in the United States alone, and the best efforts of those in the community movement to “save” others will not be enough to prevent this from occurring. Sad—but true.

A second point to keep in mind is that in our evolution as humans, community living was important—in the sense that those who happened or chose to live in communities had the best chance of surviving [predators](#). And because of the importance of community living,

when females chose mates, they likely selected those males who displayed cooperative tendencies (possibly because of their genes)—i.e., [sexual selection](#) likely occurred.

Likewise, community living will have survival value for those living in them as societies collapse: Those who are drawn to community living will be “selected for” at the expense of those who are *not* so drawn. There is always the possibility that those who are not attracted to community living will try to join communities once the society starts to collapse, and such individuals should be invited in—provided they agree to the rules that have been established for living in that community. If outsiders simply *take over* a community, however, it’s likely that that community will die out at some point.

28. Will the community movement referred to above be successful? It’s highly doubtful, and for two reasons. On the one hand, few in our society are aware of the problems that “global warming” will be posing for us humans within a few years (it’s *already* causing problems!); most are preoccupied with their jobs and personal matters, and the media and political leaders are doing virtually nothing to educate the public. On the other hand, those who are aware of the problem either don’t know what to do to respond, or *do* have ideas regarding that matter but lack the resources to proceed.
29. My prediction, then: Although some people will survive the ravages of “global warming,” most of those who do will be forced to have a rather “low” level of living; in a very real sense, humans will be reduced to a near Stone Age existence.
30. Given the bleak future that faces us, I expect that suicide and homicide will become the major causes of death within a few years, followed by disease and starvation. Once weather conditions become less erratic, causes of mortality will become more normal (i.e., close to what they are now).

Endnotes

1. A parallel discussion is given in “[50 People and Their 50 Ideas for Saving the World in 50 Months](#),” but I find nothing of interest—or value—in that set of ideas (having read mainly the sampling of ideas contained in this article, not the full 50 as they appeared in *The Guardian*). If this is all that our leaders have to offer, we are doomed! However, I do agree with the latter part of this statement by Dario Kenner, of the Bolivian Climate Change Platform: “While it is unrealistic to expect a return to the pre-industrial era we do need to recognise our link with nature and the urgency to begin the transition to a new model of living.” As to it being “unrealistic to return to the pre-industrial era,” Mr. Kenner doesn’t seem to realize that it’s virtually inevitable that we *will* so do!
2. Both of these terms are misleading, a more accurate label being “[trendular atmospheric depatternization](#)” (TAD).

3. [NeWFism](#), however, might come into its own.
4. I present a slightly more detailed of societal change in my "[Lovelock's Limitations](#)."
5. Thus, the genocide of Native Americans—"only" [about 100 million](#)!—will be a "cakewalk" in comparison.
6. On pp. 5 – 6 Schwartz states: "In the archeological literature, collapse usually entails some or all of the following: the fragmentation of states into smaller political entities; the partial abandonment or complete desertion of urban centers, along with the loss or depletion of their centralizing functions; the breakdown of regional economic systems; and the failure of civilizational ideologies." And on p. 7 he states: "If collapse entails, at least in part, the disintegration of states, urban systems, economic systems, or ideologies, then regeneration [of complexity] should consist of the reconstruction of the same kinds of institutions and phenomena. It is important to emphasize that by regeneration we mean the reappearance of society complexity (states, cities, etc.) after periods of decentralization, not the reappearance of *specific* complex societies." These statements indicate that Schwartz (and the other contributors to this volume) regard complexity as a "good," but merely *assume* that it is, without providing any support for that assumption. Evidently they think of complexity as being *obviously* "good." I, for one, see nothing inherently "good" in complexity, and would certainly not "hold it up" as something to be consciously sought for its own sake.

I would add that whatever sorts of human societies there are by 2100 CE, it's unlikely that any of them will be "complex"!

The Current Irrelevance of Jesus

Alton C. Thompson

As my title may lead to misinterpretation of the point that I wish to make in this essay, let me begin by anticipating that possibility, and making two comments. First, in a very real sense Jesus has *always* been irrelevant in that with *Christianity*, Jesus has always been honored only in the breach. That is, what Christianity has always emphasized is believing *in*, rather than *believing*, Jesus; i.e., accepting (or pretending to!) certain “facts” about Jesus (e.g., he was born of a virgin, was crucified by the Romans, but in doing so “died for our sins,” etc.), and participating in rituals that acknowledge those “facts” (e.g., celebrating his birth at Christmas and alleged resurrection at Easter), rather than primarily paying heed to the *teachings* attributed to him.

Jesus, then, has been an irrelevant personage within the religion of Christianity, but it is not *that* fact that concerns me here. What I’m referring to, rather, is Jesus *per se*, and stating that his “ministry” (to use an anachronistic term) was irrelevant—both for *his* time, and for *ours* as well.

Before specifying my reasons for making such a (startling?!) declaration, let me note that the Palestine of Jesus’s time was an *occupied* area—by the Romans. Likely this was an irritant to virtually all Palestinian Jews, including Jesus; it is clear, however, that Jesus did not direct his ministry *against* the Roman occupying power—for he is said to have [stated](#), e.g., in Matthew 22:

¹⁹“Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

²¹“Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Rather than directing his ministry at the Roman occupiers, he directed it at the *religious leaders* of his society, and focused on two points: [1]

- *What* was being taught, and
- *How* the Temple was being treated.

As to *what* was being taught, prior to the return from [Babylonian Exile](#), Jewish thinking (by its *religious leaders*, at least) had had a *societal* focus (the “[covenant](#)”) concept. *After* the return to

Palestine, however, Jewish thinking became more *individualistic* in character, which meant that the Law came to be interpreted in an *inverted* way—from a *help* the victim orientation to a *blame* the victim one, the latter hinted at in this passage from [John 9](#):

¹As he [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Thus, Jesus’s famous [Good Samaritan parable](#) can be understood as simultaneously (a) criticizing the Jewish leadership at the time from this standpoint, and (b) providing what he perceived as a *correct* interpretation of the Law (as expressed/summarized, e.g., in [Leviticus 19:18](#)).

(A question that arises here, though, is whether Jesus *sincerely* accepted, “in his heart,” the “love your neighbor” principle, or was merely a religious purist who wanted to see Hebrew Law practiced “to the letter.” It seems to me that the weight of evidence supports the first view—given that it’s clear that Jesus rejected the more “barbaric” elements of Hebrew Law—such as stoning “sinners,” as illustrated by the clever way that Jesus [defended the woman](#) caught in adultery.)

As to, second, the Temple, the incident reported in [Matthew 21:12 – 13](#)

¹²Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ¹³“It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

indicates that the Temple was highly important to Jesus, for he insisted that its supposed holiness must be maintained. His overturning of tables and benches represented a *temporary* “fix” of this problem, but he seemed interested in finding a more permanent solution. What the following passage, e.g., in [John 6](#)

⁵³Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. ⁵⁵For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

seems to suggest—per a brilliant discussion (pp. 152 – 54) in Bruce Chilton’s [The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program Within a Cultural History of Sacrifice](#) is that Jesus’s disgust with

Temple practices caused him to advocate the use of bread and wine as *substitutes* for Temple sacrifices—substitutes having *purity*, in contrast with *Temple* sacrifices, corrupted as they were by Temple practices.

This interpretation of the passage does not “jump out” as one reads the passage, but is a highly plausible one given Chilton’s discussion. Christianity, of course, has been too literalistic to perceive such an interpretation in the passage, and instead has used it—and the [Last Supper](#) passage—as the basis for developing the ritual of Eucharist (or “Communion,” in some denominations). This development reflects the fact that Christianity was developed by diaspora Jews and gentiles, whose ideas were strongly influenced by the “[Mysteries](#)” that were popular in the Mediterranean Basin at the time. [2] That is, Christianity was developed by individuals who had a pagan mindset!

Given this, Christians have difficulty considering the very real possibility that the reason for Jesus’s execution had nothing to do with the Romans *per se*—despite the fact that it was *carried out* by the Romans. Rather, Jesus’s introduction of the ritualistic eating of bread and wine—as sacrifice substitutes—caught the attention of Jewish religious leaders, who recognized this practice as a threat to their livelihoods, and who then resolved to get rid of Jesus. Not wanting to be accused of doing this themselves (for fear of an uprising), they convinced the Roman authorities that Jesus represented a threat to *them*, those authorities were duped into accepting this claim—and then carried out the wishes of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

I am getting “off the track” here, however—given my earlier assertion that Jesus’s “’ministry’ was irrelevant—both for his time, and for ours as well.” The basis for my making this claim lies in the following passage in [Isaiah 65](#):

New Heavens and a New Earth

¹⁷“See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
¹⁹I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.

²⁰ “Never again will there be in it
 an infant who lives but a few days,
 or an old man who does not live out his years;
 the one who dies at a hundred
 will be thought a mere child;
 the one who fails to reach a hundred
 will be considered accursed.
²¹They will build houses and dwell in them;
 they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
²²No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
 or plant and others eat.
 For as the days of a tree,
 so will be the days of my people;
 my chosen ones will long enjoy
 the work of their hands.
²³They will not labor in vain,
 nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune;
 for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
 they and their descendants with them.
²⁴Before they call I will answer;
 while they are still speaking I will hear.
²⁵The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
 and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
 and dust will be the serpent’s food.
 They will neither harm nor destroy
 on all my holy mountain,”
 says the LORD.

What this passage reveals—except to those who choose to interpret it literally!—is that the whole “thrust” of Hebrew thinking was that of the Good Society—what *characteristics* it should have, and *how* to achieve it. One part of that thinking was to create laws, in the hope that people (members of the elite in particular) would follow them—thereby (they hoped—if but unconsciously) yielding the Good Society. Another part of that thinking is represented by the *prophets*—individuals who were not so much interested in making *forecasts* (as is often thought) as in directing messages/warnings at members of the elite, in the hope that *they* would then act to usher in the Good Society.

[J. Elliot Corbett](#)—author of *The Prophets on Main Street* and *Becoming a Prophetic Community*—has had the wisdom to recognize—in effect, if not actually—that it is the *prophets* of the Hebrew Bible, rather than Jesus and Paul of the “New Testament,” that especially have relevance for us moderns. Related to this point, I would add that insofar as Jesus lacked a *societal* orientation (and there’s no indication that he *had* such an orientation), he wasn’t even relevant for his own time: The orientation of his “ministry” was clearly *individualistic*, rather

than *societal*. True, it was apparently *enlightened*—e.g., in that for him a “neighbor” was *anyone* who needed help—but his ministry evinces no indication that he was interested in “reforming” his society. Perhaps Jesus would have *liked* to do more than he did, but recognized that the Roman presence made that impossible. For that reason I hesitate to be overly harsh in my criticism of Jesus.

The statement attributed to Jesus in [Mark 6:4](#) suggests that Jesus thought of *himself* as a prophet; and the statement in [Mark 8:28](#) suggests that some others did. However, if either Jesus or others thought of Jesus as being a prophet, they showed ignorance of what the prophets had been “about.” For it should be clear that Jesus was *not* a prophet like Amos, Micah, Hosea, etc.

What distinguished the prophets from other personages in the Hebrew Scripture is that (a) they had an interest in ushering in the Good Society and (b) claimed that their ideas had been *revealed* to them. Jesus may have believed that the ideas *he* had had been revealed to him by God, but Jesus lacked a prophetic desire to change the nature of the society. He was, then, at most a *partial* prophet.

Christians, over the centuries, have neither—as *Christians*, that is—had an interest in ushering in a New Society, nor have they looked to revelation for ideas (the [Quakers](#) being the only exception of which I am aware).[3] Rather, they have (ostensibly) used the *Bible* as their source of ideas and their authority. Given this, it is not surprising that have been obsessed with “correct” belief (i.e., orthodoxy) and ritual rather than correct behavior (i.e., orthopraxy)—and haven’t even had that much interest in orthopraxy.

The need today is not so much to be oriented to how we should relate to others in the here-and-now (i.e., orthopraxy), nor even to be concerned with the alleged “saving” of souls. Rather, the need today is to recognize that not only our *way of life*, but the very continued *existence* of our species, is being threatened by “global warming.” That is, the relevant question for today is: What do we need to do today to “save” ourselves from the ravages of global warming? And although *Jesus* may have directed his ire at the religious leaders of his society, the point today is not to emulate Jesus in this respect (something that I seemingly suggested in my “[A New Role for the Clergy?](#)”), but to *recognize* the threat to our society—to our species, in fact—presented by global warming, and then *address* that threat.

It should be clear that global warming has “progressed” to the point that it cannot be reversed—so that our only option now is that of *adaptation*. As I have noted in previous essays, there are two possible avenues to follow with adaptation—that of homesteading, and that of community-building. The latter would be consistent with the orientation of the ancient prophets, and for that reason, along with the reason that it would be the “best” option, I would advocate it. Indeed, I have no doubt that if one of the “Old Testament” prophets were with us today, his primary

concern would be with the threat posed by global warming. Ideally, he would also have some good ideas on what to do about that threat!

Endnotes

1. The “[Kingdom of God](#)” concept plays an important role in all four of the canonical gospels; in fact, in [Luke 4:43](#) Jesus is quoted as saying that he was “sent” to preach the Kingdom of God (rather than die a sacrificial death that would “atone for our sins”—a concept that reeks of paganism, besides being incredibly stupid). That phrase has often been interpreted as meaning that Jesus taught that God would be arriving on earth soon to establish His kingdom, centered on Jerusalem (that concept somehow becoming “converted” to the idea that *Jesus* was coming back “soon” (i.e., the “second coming”). Another interpretation is that Jesus was saying that if peoples came to understand, and follow, the *true* Law (that Jesus was teaching), one could say that the *rulership* of God was occurring—another way of saying that the Kingdom of God had “arrived.” Given, however, that Jesus wrote nothing, nor did any of his contemporaries write about him, it is difficult to make a determination as to how much of what the gospels writers wrote actually reflected what Jesus said and did.

Needless to say, my assertion here that Jesus’s ministry had two principal thrusts represents *my* view of Jesus, gained through my reading and thinking about over the years. In the “Jesus literature” Jesus has been portrayed in a great variety of ways—as a Cynic-like teacher, wisdom teacher, Pharisee, Zealot, prophet, magician, eschatological figure, Essene, charismatic, spirit person, healer, founder of a mystery sect, etc. Given this variety, it is difficult to decide on how one should perceive Jesus; as a consequence, I decline to insist that my concept of Jesus is the “correct” one. Not only would that be arrogant, but would make it difficult for me to *change* my concept of Jesus. I want to keep an open mind about Jesus, so that if I encounter a view regarding Jesus that I regard as more convincing than the one I currently hold, I will feel free to abandon my current view in favor of that other view.

2. Prior to Jesus’s execution, [Matthew](#) has Jesus say that the bread that he was eating with his disciples was his body, and the wine they were drinking was his blood. This passage was obviously written decades after Jesus is alleged to have made these statements, and represents either a misunderstanding of Jesus’s purpose in using bread and wine (i.e., as sacrifice substitutes, as Chilton has argued) or as a deliberate misrepresentation—done to make meaningful for diaspora Jews and gentiles a practice instituted by Jesus to express his disgust with Temple practices.
3. The New Word Fellowship institution (NeWF) that I introduced in my “[Worship: An Exercise in Revisioning](#)” looks—as the very name suggests—to revelation for ideas, and in that respect has a purpose related to that of Quaker (Society of Friends) religious meetings. The main difference between the two is that during a Quaker service, only those who feel inspired to speak do so,

whereas during a NeWF session, all of those present are given an *opportunity* to speak, with all being, in fact, *encouraged* to do so.

[October 10, 2012: <http://bravenewworld.in/2012/10/10/pdf-some-comments-on-civility/>]

Some Comments on Civility

Alton C. Thompson

A few days ago I received the alumni magazine from my undergraduate *alma mater*, Wisconsin State College-Oshkosh, now the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. (Oshkosh is located about 80 miles north of Milwaukee, on the west shore of Lake Winnebago—the Winnebago Native Americans now known as the Ho-Chunk Nation. The city of Oshkosh was named for Chief Oshkosh of the Menominee tribe.)

What piqued my interest in this issue was an article entitled “Can We Disagree Yet Find Common Ground?,” devoted to a discussion of civility. The article notes that P. M. Forni, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, founded The Civility Institute at that university in 2000, and in 2003 published [*Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*](#). This book has evidently initiated a movement of sorts, for the article states: “These days, civility is the buzzword in communities across the country and on campuses like UW-Oshkosh.”

In Oshkosh there is an “Oshkosh Civility Project, led by the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation. Its purpose is “to ‘build a stronger and more diverse community by actively sharing our ideas and opinions with others in thoughtful and considerate ways.’” The article continues: “The project has spread into schools, businesses[,] and book clubs. More than 800 community members have pledged to be a part of the initiative since its inception last year [2011] and vow to uphold nine principles rooted in the original *golden rule*—treat others how you’d like to be treated, respectfully.”

The “nine rules” selected from Forni’s list of 25 are:

- Pay attention.
- Listen closely.
- Be inclusive.
- Don’t gossip
- Show respect.
- Be agreeable.
- Apologize.

- Give constructive feed back.
- Accept responsibility.

It's difficult to quarrel with this list of principles, but I have some problems with the “civility movement,” and will try to be civil in expressing them:

- I agree that civility in our relationships with others is important, and that it's important to develop and promulgate civility *principles*—such as the nine listed above. The question that I would raise, however is: To *get* civil behavior is it enough that people *learn*, and give intellectual *assent* to, a set of civility principles?

I would answer that question in the negative—and sense that many would agree with me on that point. They might, then, wonder (unconsciously, if not consciously) what's *also* needed, and if they are themselves unable to provide an answer to the question, I will provide one *for* them: They need appropriate *experiences*, so that those experiences help them develop an ability *habitually* to be civil in their relationships with others.

Likely there are different kinds of experiences that would do this, but let me single out one that I introduced five years ago in my [“Worship: An Exercise in Revisioning.”](#) (written using the name James B. Gray). Although that paper was written from a religious (but non-sectarian) perspective, the discussion (on pp. 38 – 60) of meetings in that paper has more general relevance.

The main purpose of that discussion was to introduce a new institution, the New Word Fellowship (NeWF, which in a later [eBook](#) I referred to as the Structured Interaction Group, SIG), and in the process of doing so I (a) made some observations on church meetings, then (b) launched (p. 40 ff.) into a discussion of “design principles” for meetings, (c) made (p. 42 ff.) some background comments, (d) offered (p. 44) some introductory remarks, (e) stated (p. 44 ff.) some preliminaries, then (f) some (p. 47 ff.) guiding principles, and (g) finally some expected outcomes—both generic (p. 51 ff.) and genetic (pp. 54 – 60).

The NeWF .was presented as a special sort of discussion group wherein certain “rules of engagement” were recognized and practiced, the whole point being to provide the participant with an *experience* that would have a variety of effects, including helping participants develop the *habit* of “engaging” others in a civil manner. Developing such a habit is important because we so often find ourselves in encounters in which we behave badly—and afterward, recognize this and regret how we had reacted. If we would develop the *habit* of being civil, I believed, we would increase the odds of our behaving civilly in *all* of the situations that we might encounter.

- The aforementioned article states: “Civility, like democracy, is a system for compromise.” I would react to this statement by quoting (sans footnotes) from p. 50 of my “Worship” paper:

Let me begin here by noting that University of Wisconsin-Madison philosopher Max C. Otto, in discussing his concept of “realistic idealism” years ago [in *The Human Enterprise: An Attempt to Relate Philosophy to Daily Life*, 1940], gave the example of a conflict situation that was resolved amicably. The conflict involved the owners of a (gasoline) “filling station” in a small town who wanted to cut down some elm trees, and town residents who opposed that action. Otto noted that the conflict was resolved by a “young man,” and emphasized that this young man did not propose a *compromise*—i.e., a solution that by its very nature is one that is *accepted* by all parties concerned, but *satisfies* none of them. Rather, the young man proposed a *creative*—i.e., a higher-level—solution; a solution that not only *satisfied* both parties completely, but (thereby) *removed the acrimony* that had developed between the parties. Otto added that such solutions are not only *desirable* (obviously!), but *possible*. Unfortunately, however, Otto offered no guidelines for achieving such solutions.

I suspect, though, that Dr. Otto would approve (were he alive today), with enthusiasm, the New Word Fellowship because it is designed (for one thing) to produce creative ideas. Not that it is so *guaranteed*, of course; but creative ideas should be a common occurrence in Fellowship sessions. Creative ideas that serve to resolve conflicts, on the one hand—but other types of creative ideas as well. Also, the fact that a Fellowship fosters the achievement of creative ideas concerning which there can be a *consensus* has, in turn, various consequences—discussed below under two headings. Finally, the fact that the creative ideas achieved can be thought of as having been revealed by Deity (and undoubtedly *will* be by some participants) *itself* can have various additional consequences (also commented upon below).

(The “two” headings are the “Generic Outcomes” and “Genetic Outcomes” referred to above.

Why settle for compromise when something better can be achieved, I ask. The key, I believe, is in interacting with others in “structured” situations as much as possible, for the interaction that occurs during such sessions can lead not only to creative ideas but numerous other benefits as well (discussed on pp. 51 – 60 of my “Worship” paper).

- One can read into the article the implicit assertions that:
 - If we would become a society wherein civility was commonplace, we could solve any other problems that we might have. Or perhaps:
 - The *only* problem we have in our society is that of a lack of sufficient civility in our relationships one with another.

Let me address these implicit assertions indirectly by first asking: Why is the lack of civility such an important feature of our society at present? Others would likely answer this question differently than I would, but I would identify two factors—the fact that this is a political season, and the fact that our politics has come to be dominated by Big Money, so that to call our society a democracy now is a farce.

Big Money is able to promote outright lies and partial truths that will appeal to a certain segment of the population, and help reinforce their fixation on a certain set of views. Big Money does not believe what it is promoting, of course, for it does that promoting only to align a certain segment of voters with those candidates who will do what Big Money wants done—that which will benefit Big Money, rather than the voters concerned, of course. In a sense, the article recognizes this in stating: “Money, not necessarily a strong voice or a civil opinion, is what allows for swamping the masses with messaging.”” However, that statement is rather ambiguous in comparison with the assessment that I have just offered.

On the one hand, those in that voting bloc are encouraged to spout the lies and partial truths conveyed to them on radio and television programs supported by Big Money, because what they are hearing convinces them that their prejudices have firm support. And the fact that these people present their views with such confidence makes it impossible for those who are better informed to carry on an intelligent and civil conversation with such folk.

Thus, the basic reason why—in my opinion—there is a civility problem in this society at present is that Big Money is pushing lies and partial truths regarding “hot button” issues to a certain segment of the population—which lies and partial truths *are*, in fact, accepted as truths by those. I would like to think that if some such people were participants in the same NeWF as better-informed people, barriers could be knocked down—but perhaps I am being overly optimistic here.

(I should add that it is not just Big Money that is involved in this charade. Yesterday’s (October 7, 2012) *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (which I usually refer to as the *Milwaukee Urinal*—whoops! There goes my civility! *I am*, however, being *honest* here!) carried a column by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, which praised Mitt Romney for his return to a moderate position, based on his recent debate performance. Surely Brooks is aware of the fact that Romney has been a notorious “flip-flopper,” so that it’s likely that Romney adopted a moderate stance for the purposes of the debate *only*, and that his true beliefs are better expressed in his famous [47% speech](#). Yet the tone of the column was to suggest that the views expressed by Romney in the debate actually represent the “true” Romney. It’s difficult to believe that Brooks actually *believes* such nonsense. Yet, his *expressing* such a viewpoint—in face of the fact that Romney’s [perpetual](#) (I hesitate to say “pathological,” not being a psychiatrist) [lying](#) (except for those rare moments of honesty—e.g., his 47% comments) has been [well-documented](#) (also [see](#))—makes one question his integrity as a columnist. It will also likely sway some independents and people with moderate views to vote for Romney. Please keep in mind here that just

because I have been criticizing Romney here, it doesn't follow that I admire Obama—for I don't; the candidate for the presidency that I like most is Ross Carl “Rocky” [Anderson](#), former mayor of Salt Lake City.)

As to my second point—that the article in question can be construed as suggesting that a lack of civility is our *only* problem. It should be obvious that our society has *numerous* problems (we all have our own lists), but the one that I would emphasize is one that is only now beginning to show itself—that of global warming. In many of my previous essays on this site I have discussed that problem from a variety of angles, but the main point that I have tried to make about this problem is that it appears that we are very near a “tipping point”—a point where global warming will begin to “feed on itself,” so that change in atmospheric conditions becomes very rapid very soon. In fact, Kevin Anderson, an advisor to the British government on climate matters, has stated that he expects that the global mean will rise (from the base point of about 1750, i.e., the beginning of the Industrial Revolution) by 4° C by 2060 (it has risen “only” 0.8° C) so far—and that between now and 2060 the various phenomena associated with global warming will utterly decimate the world's population.

I have no reason to doubt Prof. Anderson on this matter, and would simply add two points:

- It is too late for mitigation efforts to be successful—our only hope now is to engage in adaptation efforts.
- What “utterly decimation” implies is that societies—including ours, of course—will begin collapsing within a few decades.

What these two points suggest to me is that—given that it would be foolish to look to government for leadership, as neither President Obama nor Mitt Romney evinces any concern with this issue—we as citizens begin—and ASAP—to engage in adaptation efforts. What I have advocated specifically on this site numerous times is that we take this opportunity to create a New Society within the shell of the Existing Order, but others will have other ideas—and the more ideas generated, and acted upon, the greater the chance that more of us will survive.

I could offer more comments on the “Can We Disagree . . .” article, but what I've said above will need to suffice.

One final point, however: I would like to see those interested in New Society development use the NeWF as a vehicle for their planning efforts, and would invite those who have *other* solutions in mind to use the same vehicle. And if others can introduce improvements in that institution—based on their experiences with it—I would be most interested in hearing from them (A.Thompson@Astronautics.com).

A New Declaration of Independence

Alton C. Thompson

The *new* Declaration to which I am referring here would be manifest, not in a *document* like the [Declaration of Independence](#) but, rather, in *actions*. Actions that would have the *intent* of [secession](#), in a sense—but *only* in a sense. For whereas efforts at secession make *conscious recognition* of the Larger Society from which separation is desired, and are *explicit* efforts at secession, the declaration to which I am referring here would:

- Stem from a *motivation* different from that of a secession movement.
- Advocate not so much withdrawal *per se* from the Larger Society but, rather, the creation of a New Society within the husk of the Existing Order. This creation *would*, of course, of necessity involve withdrawal, but that withdrawal would be simply a necessary step to the creation of a New Society—would, i.e., be of an *incidental*, rather than *fundamental*, nature.

The motivation behind a secessionist movement—the one occurring today in [Vermont](#) being an excellent example—is *political* independence—from the United States of America, in this case. The existing characteristics of Vermont society are taken as a “given,” suggesting that no thought is being given to changes in the *nature* of existing Vermont society—which implies that those involved in that movement are perfectly content with Vermont *as it is*. The only change envisioned by the Vermont secession movement is separation from the United States to form a separate nation—a new nation that, because of its present location, would border the United States and Canada. And those involved in the movement evidently assume that this separation from the rest of the United States would not only be *desirable* but *possible* (notwithstanding the fact that in the mid 1800s a group of southern states tried to secede—which event helped precipitate a Civil War . . . that they lost!).

The motivation behind the “declaration” to which I am referring would be that of creating a New Society within the existing borders of the United States. Whereas the Vermont secession movement wants the “New Vermont” to have the same geographical borders as Vermont as it exists currently, the New Society to which I am referring would not be a single geographical unit. Rather, it would consist of *communities*—each a distinct geographical unit—that are united, not in a *geographical* sense, but in their *goals*. What would *unite* the various communities comprising the New Society would be these two goals:

- To cope with the ravages expected from global warming, as the phenomena associated with “global warming” intensify—because of reaching, and passing a “[tipping point](#).”
- To provide for the residents of a given New Society community a way of life that would be relatively egalitarian and in accord with our “design specifications” as humans (see [this](#), [this](#), and [this](#)). Would, that is, provide them—*all* of them, I should add—with a way of life worth living. (Note that Vermont’s secession *per se* would not result in any (or much) societal betterment, nor would it prepare the residents of the new country of New Vermont for the ravages that global warming is likely to be inflicting on us in the near future.)

What should be emphasized regarding these two basic principles is that they would be “[operationalized](#)” not by some one individual (a czar of some sort) but, rather, by community members, with all adult community members being involved in the operationalization. This has two implications:

- Each community would operationalize the principles in a way that they—as a group—had decided upon. Given this, communities would vary in *how* they operationalized the principles—in part because the nature of the locale of a given community would vary from community to community, in part because each group would contain a unique assemblage of individuals with unique interests and abilities.
- How a *given* community operationalized the principles would vary over *time*—in part because as a given group gained experience it likely would make changes, in part because the membership of the community would change over time, as some were born, some died, and some either moved to or from the community.

Those involved in a New Society movement likely would make an effort *not* to call attention to themselves—out of fear that publicity for their movement might attract the attention of members of the ruling class, who would then squelch the movement. They would abide by whatever laws and customs prevailed in the area within which a given community was created, and in that respect would not “advertise” themselves as different—while, though, developing a way of life that *was* different in its orientation from that of the Larger Society. They would not, however, *isolate* themselves from those members of the Larger Society who were neighbors, so as to avoid the development of attitudes of suspicion by neighbors—attitudes that could result in violence directed against community members. Each community would need to learn to walk on the “tightrope” represented by how best to interact with one’s neighbors.

While on the one hand not wanting to “stand out like a sore thumb,” members of a given community would be wise to convey to neighbors what they were “about”—emphasizing especially their belief that *global warming* was occurring, and would increasingly pose a threat to *all* members of the society. Thus, they would want to make known to neighbors the coping measures that they were engaging in—both to educate neighbors, and to help establish cordial relationships with neighbors. In doing so, community members might very well discover that some neighbors would be able to provide valuable ideas for coping; and if that occurred, that would further cement relationships between community members and their neighbors.

The reason that I emphasize that community members convey to neighbors their coping measures and reasons for them *rather than* any sociological features that might distinguish the community from the “outside world” of neighbors is that the former is likely to be less controversial, thus less likely to provoke antagonism between community members and neighbors. A time might be reached where neighbors would make inquiries regarding sociological differences, and if and when that occurs, community members should do their best in explaining their practices and the reasons behind those practices. But the relationship between a community and its neighbors should be allowed to evolve “naturally,” without any attempt to push the community’s values and practices onto neighbors.

As a New Society movement gets underway, there will be a simultaneous growth of that movement and a disintegration of the Larger Society—and the New Society movement will grow in part because of that latter fact. Many in our society will, of course, view the Larger Society’s disintegration as catastrophic, but I will not be among them—for our society has become increasingly rotten during my lifetime, and I will welcome its disintegration, with a concomitant growth of a New Society. There are various reasons for welcoming that disintegration, but these [recent comments](#) by Paul Craig Roberts provide—for me, at least—an important reason:

By 2005, a year after torture photos from Abu Ghraib were leaked, polls of Americans showed that 38% had succumbed to the propaganda that torture was justified in some circumstances. After four more years of neoconservative advocacy of torture, an Associated Press poll reported in 2009 that 52% of Americans approved of torture.

Torture apparently was an instrument of US cold war policy. Torture was taught to Latin American militaries by the US School of the Americas, which operated in Panama and subsequently at Fort Benning, Georgia. However, this was a clandestine operation. It awaited the neoconservative Bush regime for US Department of Justice (sic) attorneys, graduates of the best law schools, to write legal memos justifying torture despite US statutory and international laws prohibiting torture, and for both the president and vice president of the United States to openly acknowledge and justify torture. Some of the criminals who wrote these memos are now teaching in prestigious law schools. One was appointed to the federal judiciary and sits as a judge sentencing others for their offenses.

Our national government lost its moral compass decades ago—assuming it ever had one, that is!—and our citizens are increasingly losing theirs as well, as attitudes toward torture demonstrate. How can anyone who believes in moral behavior consent to what has been, and is, happening to our country?! Supposedly, the United States is a Christian country, but “[If Christ Came to Chicago](#)” (by [William T. Stead](#)) today, he might suffer the same fate that he did 2,000 years ago—although perhaps in a more “sophisticated” fashion.

Those of us who object to the direction that our country has been taking have perhaps felt helpless, and thus frustrated. The onset of global warming, however, gives us an opportunity to develop a new perspective. It makes us realize that rather than thinking of the difficulties involved in reforming our society, it makes more sense to recognize that doing that simply isn’t *necessary*—because we don’t need to expend any effort to reform it. Trying to do so, in fact, would be a waste of time—for the simple reason that global warming will perform a sort of reforming for us: It will act to *wreck* the society. In recognizing that, we can turn our attention, rather, to creating a New Society within the shell of the Existing Order—and let the Larger Society disintegrate.

Once the New Society is well underway in its development, and gains a measure of coherence so that it can establish a national government (with this process also occurring in other parts of the world), there will be an opportunity to develop a foreign policy of which one can be proud. Needless to say, as William Blum has pointed out in painful detail (in his [Killing Hope](#)), what we’ve had to date has been “nothing to write home about” (to put it mildly!).

My hope, however, is that a New Society movement will occur not only in the United States but in other parts of the world as well, so that the whole concept of “underdeveloped world” will become obsolete. What we need is a world in which we have a new set of nations, all of about the same level of development—with “development” itself having a sociological/psychological and spiritual meaning rather than economic one. In such a world “foreign policy” would have a different meaning as well—with the possibility, even, that it will become meaningless eventually! This might be regarded as a “utopian” view, but the fact of the matter is that although global warming will wreak havoc on us humans (it has already started to!), it will also provide us with opportunities—and if we are wise, we will take advantage of those opportunities.

(What prompted this essay in the first place was Jada Thacker’s “[Paul] [Ryan’s Distortion of America’s Founding](#),” but I have no idea how I got from that article to my essay! Evidently my mind is analogous to a [dendritic stream system](#). Last night—October 11, 2012—Paul Ryan—who is “my” Representative in the U. S. Congress, in the sense that I live in the district that he allegedly “represents”—[debated](#) Vice President Joseph Biden, and did not fare very well.)

Academic Myopia

Alton C. Thompson

A recent article—“[Approaching a State Shift in Earth’s Biosphere](#)”—in (pp. 52 – 58) the journal *Nature* addresses the “tipping point” issue. The primary author of the article is Anthony D. Barnosky of the University of California, Berkeley, but 21 co-authors are also listed! Given that fact, one would expect that the document would exude a certain degree of blandness—and it does!

Although the article is concerned with tipping points, that term is used only once in the article, on p. 55. As the article’s title implies, the term “state shift” is usually used instead of “tipping point,” presumably because of the latter term’s greater elegance . . . or something.

“State shifts” themselves are defined as changes (p. 52) “which abruptly override trends and produce unanticipated biotic effects.” The “biosphere” therein alluded to (and referred to *explicitly* in the article’s title) would, of course, include humans, but the *focus* of the article is on the biosphere *per se*, with humans primarily given a causal role. As the article notes (p. 52), humans “now dominate Earth, changing it in ways that threaten its ability to sustain us and other species.”

That state shifts occur (p. 52) “is now well documented . . . [, they claim, and] “biological systems on many scales can shift rapidly from an existing state to a radically different state.” Biological states themselves, however, must be understood as (p. 52) “neither steady nor in equilibrium . . . [but, rather,] “characterized by a defined range of deviations from a mean condition over a prescribed period of time.” A state shift, then, results in the “rapid” change from one “mean condition” to another such condition.

The shift from one state to another can, they note, be caused (p. 52) “by either a ‘threshold’ or [a] ‘sledgehammer’ effect.” The latter sort of effect is more predictable because the external causal agent involved has acted quickly—e.g., if a bulldozer has cleared a forest, biotic changes occur rapidly in response of that rapid clearing.

With a “threshold effect” the external causal agent (e.g., runoff from agricultural fields to a lake) acts “slowly” over time, and only when a certain “threshold” is reached does sudden change to a new state begin. One way of visualizing this sudden change is to imagine a glass of water on a table; someone begins pushing gently on the top, so that the glass begins to deviate more and more from the vertical. A point is reached, however, where a weight threshold (in this case) is

crossed, and the glass suddenly tips (with the water spilling). As the authors note in the case of the biosphere (p. 52): “State shifts resulting from threshold effects can be difficult to anticipate.” If empirical studies of analogous previous state shifts have been undertaken, it may be possible to predict when the threshold will be reached with a given *new* case. Otherwise, one will not know when the threshold is crossed until it is crossed!—although experimental and/or modeling research may provide useful clues as to when it will be reached. The authors note that (p. 52) “once a critical transition occurs, it is extremely difficult or even impossible for the system to return to its previous state.”

We humans need to be aware of this latter fact, and be interested in preventing at least some tipping points from being crossed, for two reasons:

- During the transition period from one state to another state, conditions are likely to be chaotic—and therefore unpredictable—so that *adapting* to those conditions may become extremely difficult, or even impossible. If conditions are extremely *difficult*, the implication is that living will be precarious; and if they are *impossible*, human life will, of course, be impossible.
- Even if it is possible to survive the transition period (by, e.g., migrating), the fact that the new state will likely be *different* from the previous one may present adaptation challenges that make impossible a decent way of life.

State changes can occur on various *scales*, from local to regional to global. The authors note, (p. 53) “the realization that critical transitions and state shifts can occur on the global scale, as well as on smaller scales, is of great importance. One key question is how to recognize a global scale shift. Another is whether global-scale shifts are the cumulative result of many smaller scale events that originate in local systems or instead require global-level forcings [i.e., external causal factors] that emerge on the planetary scale and then percolate downwards to cause changes in local systems. Examining past global-scale state shifts provides useful insights into both of these issues.”

In doing such an examination, the authors note that Earth’s biosphere (p. 54) “has undergone state shifts in the past, over various (usually very long) timescales, and therefore can do so in the future.” They add: “One of the fastest planetary state shifts, and the most recent, was the transition from the last glacial into the present interglacial condition, which occurred over millennia.” This transition was rather rapid, for “within ~3,300 yr, punctuated by episodes of abrupt, decadal-scale climatic oscillations, full interglacial conditions were attained.” In fact: “Most of the biotic change—which included extinctions, altered diversity patterns[,] and new community compositions—occurred within a period of 1,600 yr beginning ~12,900 yr ago.”

Given that the occurrence of state shifts on a global scale have occurred in the past, occurrences in the future can be expected, and the authors identify the following factors as *current* “forcing mechanisms” (p. 53):

- The growth of human population, “with attendant resource consumption.”
- Habitat transformation and fragmentation.
- Energy production and consumption.
- Climate change.

The authors add (pp. 53 - 54): “All of these far exceed, in both rate and magnitude, the forcings evident at the most recent global-scale shift, the last glacial-interglacial transition, which is a particularly relevant benchmark for comparison given that the two global-scale forcings at that time—climate change and human population growth—are also primary forcings today. During the last glacial-interglacial transition, however, these were probably separate, yet coincidental, forcings. Today conditions are very different because global-scale forcings including (but not limited to) climate change have emerged as a direct result of human activities.”

Thus, although state changes have occurred on a global scale in the past, the important factors currently operating to bring about change are:

- Unique (in their *causation*, at any rate).
- Of a threshold nature.

The first of these factors suggests the possibility that a transition today could occur much more rapidly than any of the transitions that have occurred in the past—perhaps within a few decades. And the first factor, combined with the second one, suggests that it is impossible to know *when* the threshold will be crossed. It is not surprising, then, that different climate scientists place that threshold at different points—e.g., a 2° C. increase (since the Industrial Revolution, i.e., 1750), or as little as 1° C., etc. The authors do, however, “go out on the limb” and declare (p. 57) that “another global-scale state change is highly plausible within decades to centuries, if it has not already been initiated.”

Their “if it has not already been initiated” is highly significant because it suggests that their collective belief is that it is at least *conceivable* that the critical threshold *has* been crossed already. One would expect, then, that if they actually *believed* that this was possible, their article would evince a sense of urgency. Yet it does not—a fact suggested, indeed, in the article’s second sentence (!), in which they note that our awareness of “man’s role in changing the face of the earth” (to allude to a notable [old book](#)) “has led to a growing interest in forecasting biological

responses on all scales from local to global.” But not *addressing* the problem, one is tempted to ask?!

The authors’ conclusions—as stated at the beginning of the article—are that the possibility of state shifts, at the global scale, mean that (p. 53):

- To “minimize biological surprises that would adversely impact humanity, it is essential to improve biological forecasting by anticipating critical transitions that can emerge on a planetary scale and understanding how such global forcings cause local changes.”
- To “prevent a global-scale shift, or at least to guide it as best we can, it will be necessary to address the root causes of human-driven global change and to improve our management of biodiversity and ecosystem services.”

Their reference to an urgent need to develop forecasting capabilities (rather than addressing the problem) reminds me of an analogy introduced by Everett Knight in [*The Objective Society*](#), a book published over a half century ago. As I read this book shortly after it was published, and can’t now find my copy of the book, I will need to rely on my memory of the analogy—and as a consequence may present an imperfect account of the analogy. But, to the best of my recollection, his analogy went as follows:

A carriage was careening wildly down a mountain, and the passenger inside was making careful observations while this was occurring—“objective” observations at that. If he had been a “regular” person, he likely would have been doing all in his power to slow, and even stop, the carriage—for, after all, if he didn’t, the carriage was likely to crash at some point, and he would then be either killed or severely injured. Being an “objective scientist,” however, his interest was in *observing* reality rather than *changing* it . . . the carriage crashed, and he was killed.

Those of us who are “regular” people would say that this man was a fool. (Some might even add that the world is better off without people like him!) The question that I have for the “tribe”(!) of authors of the article in question, then, is: Given that you recognize that it’s *possible* that a critical threshold has been passed, why don’t you *also* realize that (a) the transition to a new state may have already begun; (b) if it has, the transition to a new state is likely to be a “rough ride;” (c) during that transition it’s highly likely that societies—including ours—will be collapsing, (d) which possibility means that the universities they are working for will be collapsing, and (e) their very lives may then be in question.

It would *to the interests* of these individuals to “sound the alarm”—but they do not do so in their article. For “regular” people the possibility that a threshold had already been crossed would suggest to them that this possibility be treated seriously; that the wisest course, in fact, would be to regard it as a *certainty*—and then respond appropriately. *This* should be the priority, with the development of better forecasting procedures taking the “back seat.”

The authors *do* mumble some words regarding responding to this threat:

- In referring (p. 53) to preventing “a global-scale state shift, or at least . . . [guiding] it as best we can . . .” they seem to suggest that *mitigation* efforts will work if implemented.
- In referring (p. 57) to “society’s willingness to incorporate expectations of biological instability into strategies for maintaining human well-being” they imply that *governments*—as organizations empowered to act on behalf of societies—should provide the leadership for those mitigation efforts.

My response to what the authors imply regarding responding to this problem:

- It’s *unlikely* that mitigation efforts will be engaged in by governments—or even other organizations, for that matter. *Rationally*, one might argue, governments would do this; however, the fact that they are controlled by elites—and the elites benefit from fossil fuel usage—the likelihood that governments will act rationally on this matter is extremely small.
- Even if governments *did* begin to promote mitigation efforts, those efforts would fail—because it is now too late, from a threshold-crossing standpoint, for such measures to work. Had such efforts been initiated 50 years ago, they likely would have prevented tipping points from being met and crossed. But we humans have squandered our chances here, so that there no longer is a point in initiating mitigation efforts.

What these authors don’t seem to understand is that—contrary to their listing of causal factors—the fundamental problem is that the *Western way of life* is a high-energy (*per capita*) one based on fossil fuels, and that way of life cannot be easily changed. (Indeed, it’s also likely that way of life is implicated in population growth—the other major forcing factor.) Because of that fact, what’s likely is that as global warming “progresses”—i.e., accelerates—Western societies will respond in an adequate manner—and simply collapse at some point, because of that fact.

The authors evidently don’t anticipate societal collapse, but any “objective” analysis of the evidence suggests precisely that. Once one recognizes this very strong possibility, one will realize that we have but *one* option, that of attempting to *adapt* to the changes that will be inevitably occurring. And I would add that the best *form* for this to take (in addition to migration) is a *communitarian* one.

The authors of this article would not be expected to have any useful suggestions to make regarding how we might respond to the problem of global warming—and they *don’t* have any useful suggestions! Given, however, that they are aware of the serious threat to our

species posed by crossing a tipping point, I wish that they had at least emphasized the “seriousness of the present” (to allude to an article by Robert L. Heilbroner in the Autumn 1963 issue of *The American Scholar*).

Science and “Climate Change”

Alton C. Thompson

[“Global warming” and “climate change” are often used interchangeably today to refer to certain atmospheric changes that are occurring at present. Neither term is very satisfactory, however—a point that I developed in an [earlier essay](#). “Global warming” is misleading because it implies that only a warming trend is occurring; and “climate change” is misleading because it implies that what’s occurring is simply the changing of climate boundaries. The latter term is, however, less problematic than the former one, and because of that fact—in conjunction with the facts that it is in common usage, and its meaning is fairly clear—I use the term “climate change” in this essay.”]

What science is “about” is *describing* in an “objective” and precise manner, and then developing *explanations* for what is described. One might even go so far as to assert that the latter is science’s *primary* goal, with describing being engaged in only because it is a necessary prelude to the development of explanations. *Predictions* are also a part of science, but usually not in the conventional sense—i.e., predicting what will happen in the future. In the case of *climate* science, however, interest in the future is a dominant concern—and historical investigations are often engaged in with the purpose of enabling scientists to make predictions (regarding the future) in which they can have a high level of confidence.

Explanation itself—whether in climate science or other sciences—can be thought of as involving *stages*, with a *first-stage* explanation providing a basis for developing a *second-stage* explanation, etc. In the specific case of climate science, the descriptive statements of interest are ones that pertain to changes in atmospheric phenomena over time, and a *first-stage explanation* of those changes would likely take the following form:

Humans have, via their use of fossil fuels, been transferring carbon (in the form of coal, petroleum, natural gas especially) from under the earth’s surface to the atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide (CO₂). Because they have been transferring carbon at a rate greater than “carbon sinks” can absorb it, an excess is being produced, and that excess has been increasing at an increasing rate. It is *that* fact which explains the changes in atmospheric phenomena that have been occurring in recent years.

First-stage explanations are often regarded as not particularly satisfying, because they do not delve deeply enough into the phenomena of interest. Thus, the explanation in a first-stage explanation may then become *itself* the object of explanation. Taking the above first-stage explanation as an example, the explanation offered for *it* might take the following form:

- Humans are high-energy users—in absolute, as well as *per capita*, terms.
- Most of their energy is derived from the burning of fossil fuels.
- The human population is large, and is growing rapidly.

Now if (a) these factors are identified as the *basic* causal factors that explain the changes in atmospheric phenomena that are occurring, and if (b) those changes are regarded *negatively* (which they are!), and if (c) a climate scientist is asked what to do about this problem, s/he is likely to draw upon the above explanation, and respond by identifying the following alternatives:

- Societies should *remain* as high energy-use societies, but switch to the use of other—“safe”—sources of energy.
- Societies should strive to *reduce* their energy usage, while perhaps also increasing their usage of “safe” energy sources.
- Societies should reduce their rates of population growth—perhaps to the point of “negative growth.”

That is, the view of scientists—so far as solutions are concerned—seems to be that if we know *why* a problem exists, and know the *relative importance* of the causal factors involved, we will also know how to solve the problem: Reduce the *magnitudes* of the causes—the one of primary importance in particular.

But is this approach one that is meaningful—with climate change specifically in mind? I hate to “rain on their parade” (*climate scientists*’, that is) but I would offer the following two criticisms of this approach:

- The likelihood of magnitude reduction for *any* of the above three factors is extremely low, for (a) energy companies have no interest in a switchover to the use of “safe” energy sources, and can be expected to “stonewall” on this issue well into the future; (b) were a society to reduce its *per capita* energy usage drastically, this would imply a drastic reduction in “standard of living”—which fact would be resisted by most; (c) reducing population growth in a country such as the United States (as compared with, e.g., China) would not be easily accomplished.
- Even if the above-mentioned difficulties did not exist, it appears that the amount of carbon dioxide (and other “greenhouse” gases, such as methane) in the atmosphere is enough to result in reaching, and then crossing, a climate change “tipping point”—i.e., a point after which change would begin to occur at an accelerating rate

A [recent article](#) by 22 scientists stated (p. 57) that: “Comparison of the present extent of planetary change with that characterizing past global-scale state shifts, and the enormous global forcings we continue to exert, suggests that another global-scale state shift is highly plausible within decades to centuries, if it has not already been initiated.” These scientists recognize that we humans are in a dire situation at present, despite their use of rather cautious language in expressing their concern. Their fixation on the notion that solutions can be derived directly from explanations prevents them, however, from making any meaningful recommendations regarding how to “fix the mess” that we humans are in at present.

It would seem that a “scientific” approach to problem-solving in this case provides no answer worth having. Indeed, what use of a scientific approach seems to imply is that if we were to “attack” this problem using scientific thinking as our basis, at some point in the near future our society (along with other ones, of course) will succumb to the ravages of climate change—and collapse. Also implicit here is the strong possibility that a tremendous loss of life would occur prior to this collapse—and especially *after* it did. Some scientists may sense the futility of their approach to offering solutions, but are trapped in an intellectual box, and perceive no escape from that box.

What the second of the two points immediately above suggests is that to engage in any sorts of mitigation efforts now would be pointless, so that the *only* option that we have now is that of trying to *adapt* as best we can to the changes that will be inevitably occurring.

Once we have reached this conclusion, at least three questions arise:

1. What adaptation options are there?
2. Of these options, which is best?
3. Who—in terms of what agency or organization—is best qualified to provide the necessary leadership? That is, who has not only the necessary technical expertise, but the financial resources, and commitment to provide the needed leadership?

As I have commented on these matters in previous essays, I will say nothing about them here except that the third question—regarding “who”—will certainly not involve governments, controlled as they are by interests whose members are short-sighted and ostensibly self-interested. This leaves private organizations and individuals as the possibilities for providing leadership, and I believe it most likely that leadership would be provided by one or more individuals having (a) vision, (b) intelligence, and (c) financial resources.

It’s likely that there is at least *one* person “out there” having those qualifications, and if there is, let us hope that that individual emerges soon. Else, culling of the human population is likely to

be extremely severe, and those surviving (assuming that there will *be* any!) are likely to have a rather low level of existence.

Reflections on the Upcoming Election

Alton C. Thompson

Paul Craig Roberts concludes a [recent essay](#) with these words:

What is the point of a vote when the outcome is the same? Both candidates represent the interests of Israel, not the interests of the US. Both candidates represent the interests of the military/security complex, agribusiness, the offshoring corporations, the suppression of unions and workers, the total demise of civil liberty and the US Constitution, which is in the way of unbridled executive power

In the US today, the power of money rules. Nothing else is in the equation. Why vote to lend your support to the continuation of your own exploitation? Every time Americans vote it is a vote for their own obliteration.

These depressing words—posted just days before the next election in the United States—state with painful accuracy the current situation in this country, and suggest the question: “Is there *any* reason for a citizen of this country to have any hope for the future?” My answer to this question is: “Disaster is in not only *our* future, but in the future of our *species*; and it is *that* fact that gives me hope—paradoxically.”

Granted that the problems identified by *Roberts*—who worked for the U. S. Treasury Department during the Reagan administration—give one no reason for hope. But the problem that *I* am referring to is of a far more severe nature, so that the label “disaster” is altogether fitting for it—that problem being (what is often referred to as) “climate change.”

A new [Cato Institute report](#)—designed to *look* like [Global Climate Change Impacts in the United States](#) (2009)—ostensibly provides “ammunition” to climate change deniers, but as Naomi Klein has [pointed out](#), the motivation behind the “deniers” has nothing to do with the alleged faultiness of climate science but, rather, about fears that climate change poses a threat to capitalism; that the claim that climate change is occurring

is a Trojan horse designed to abolish capitalism and replace it with some kind of eco-socialism. As conference speaker Larry Bell succinctly puts it in his new book *Climate of Corruption*, climate change “has little to do with the state of the environment and much to do with shackling capitalism and transforming the American way of life in the interests of global wealth redistribution.”

(The “conference” here refers to the fact that Klein had been attending “[Heartland Institute’s Sixth International Conference on Climate Change](#), the premier gathering for those dedicated to denying the overwhelming scientific consensus that human activity is warming the planet”)

What those associated with the Heartland Institute need to know is that:

- Capitalism *is* doomed; but, more importantly,
- Our *species* is in serious trouble.

Come to think of it, however, I really don’t *care* if Heartland Institute people believe either of the above, for what they *believe* will have little bearing on what will be *occurring*. What they believe *will*, of course, have relevance for what they *do*. But what they *do* will have no impact on the course of “climate change”—nor on the future of capitalism, for that matter. What they do—or do *not* do—*will*, however, have relevance for the probability that they and their progeny survive the ravages that climate change will be inflicting on us humans shortly—is, in fact, already inflicting. One would think that Heartland Institute folk would be interested in this fact, but given that they’re not, evidently, they’ll need to suffer the consequences—for I have no interest in trying to “convert” them.

The recent “[Approaching a State Shift in Earth’s Biosphere](#)” states, among other things, that:

The magnitudes of both local-scale direct forcing and emergent global scale forcing are much greater than those that characterized the last global scale state shift, and are not expected to decline any time soon. Therefore, the plausibility of a future planetary state shift seems high, even though considerable uncertainty remains about whether it is inevitable and, if so, how far in the future it may be.

To the general reader these words may not sound alarmist. But the “state shift” possibility to which they refer would involve:

- A drastic change in the atmospheric and related conditions at any given location on the earth’s surface.
- A transition period from the current, to the new, state that would be anything but smooth.

Both of these represent survival challenges for humans, and there is no guarantee that either challenge can be met successfully. It should be evident, however, that if one *anticipates* these challenges and develops plans to *adapt* to the changes that will be occurring, one will increase one’s chance to survive. The authors (22 in all!) of “Approaching” recognize that there is “considerable uncertainty remains about whether it is inevitable and, if so, how far in the future it may be.” The wise individual, however, will treat the *possibility* of a state shift as a *certainty*—given that it is “better to be safe than sorry.”

Although the prospect of a state shift is far more serious than the fact—emphasized by Roberts—that the difference between Rhombney and [O’Bomber](#) is a “[Tweedledee-Tweedledum](#)” one, it does not follow from that fact that the similarity between the two presidential candidates is a trivial one. It *does* have importance—but is just one of numerous problems faced by our society, a discussion of which would require a separate essay (or book)!

What a state shift implies is that (a) many will die in the process, (b) societies—including ours, of course—will collapse, and (c) their collapse will further add to the death toll. Put another way, a state shift implies unmitigated DISASTER.

That disaster in our future may not be an *inevitability* (as the 22 authors note) should not be a possibility that gives us comfort. Rather, it should be a possibility that motivates us to *plan* for it. By “planning for it” I don’t mean that we should look to our political leaders as our “saviors”—for if we do, we are sure to be disappointed: They are slaves of the Existing Order, occupying *positions* in the society that prevent them from addressing the problem of climate change in any meaningful way; and in addition, they simply are not *inclined* to provide any leadership on this matter.

Leadership—if it arises at all (and it might not!)—will need to come from individuals and from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). And the sort of leadership needed is one that recognizes that *all* of our problems stem from the *sort of society* that has developed within our borders. Thus, the proper response to climate change is not just one of initiating *adaptive measures* pertaining to climate change, but the creation of a New Society—one with a set of institutions different from those now existing. A set of institutions that will conduce the creation of not only a *New Society*, but a *Good Society*—a matter that I have commented on in various of my previous essays and eBook on this site (see [this](#) for some key links).

I will be voting in the upcoming election, but without any degree of enthusiasm. I agree with [Daniel Ellsberg](#) that neither Rhombney nor O’Bomber is worthy of my vote, but that a [vote for the latter](#) will help prevent the former from winning the election. Nobel-prize-winning economist [Paul Krugman](#) is likely right in asserting that the election of Rhombney would be a disaster for our country. However, I need to remind myself that in a [previous essay](#) I argued that that would not necessarily be a bad thing to happen!

Cooperation as an Answer

Alton C. Thompson

The executive director of the London-based Share the World's Resources, in a [recent essay](#), made the following claims (which I will present in the form of an argument):

- It “is becoming apparent through a growing body of anthropological and biological evidence that human beings are naturally predisposed to cooperate and share in order to improve our collective wellbeing and maximise our chances of survival.”
- However, “we have created an economic system based on ideologies that are entirely opposed to the principle of sharing.”
- “The earth’s ecological problems stem largely from our collective failure to share.”
- Only “by sharing the world’s resources more equitably and sustainably will we be able to address both the ecological and social crisis we face as a global community.”

Each of these claims warrants commentary.

A Natural Predisposition to Cooperate

I fully agree with the claim that we humans are natural predisposed to engage in cooperative behavior, and would argue that our very existence as a species was enabled by the fact that our ancestors engaged in such behavior as a matter of course (in part through learning, in part as a result of genetic inheritance resulting from sexual selection).

[Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*](#) (1859) had argued that “natural selection” was the engine that drove evolution, such selection involving intra-specific competition and the “survival of the fittest” (a term borrowed from [Herbert Spencer](#), and first used in the fifth edition of *Origin*). Russian geographer [Peter Kropotkin](#), however, knew—based on his personal observations in Siberia—that Darwin’s claim was baseless, and in the latter part of the nineteenth century wrote a series of articles (directed specifically at Darwin’s “bulldog,” [Thomas H. Huxley](#))—later published as [Mutual Aid](#)—that provided evidence in favor of the view that it was cooperation, rather than (intra-specific) competition, that was the primary engine of evolution.

Since that time, anthropologists, in their studies of contemporary “primitives” (i.e., peoples with a gatherer-hunter “economy”), have concluded that cooperative behavior characterizes such

groups—which leads to the inference that prior to the Agricultural Revolution (of about 10,000 years ago) cooperative behavior characterized the peoples then existing (all of whom had some sort of gatherer-hunter “economy”), a conclusion that receives some support from archeological research.

In addition, primate research by, e.g., [Frans de Waal](#) and recent experimental research—such as that conducted by scientists associated with the [Greater Good Center](#) at Berkeley, under the leadership of [Dacher Keltner](#)—provide us with a solid basis for believing that humans are “naturally” predisposed for cooperative, sharing activity.

Our Economic System

The author—Rajesh Makwana—of the essay referenced above notes: “For decades, mainstream economists and policymakers have based their decision-making on a distorted understanding of what it means to be human: that people are selfish, acquisitive, individualistic and competitive by nature—the concept of *homo economicus*. These notions are still used to justify the exaggerated role that market forces play in organising societies.” He had preceded this statement, however, by the statement that “sharing is far more prevalent in society than people often realise.”

On the one hand Makwana recognizes that cooperation is not absent from our society—it being, in fact, “more prevalent in society than people often realise”—which fact should not be surprising, given that we humans are naturally predisposed to be cooperative. At the same time, however, “mainstream economists and policymakers” have been making decisions based on the “notion” that humans are *anything but* naturally cooperative—are, rather, “selfish, acquisitive, individualistic and competitive by nature.”

How can this be?! Does this mean that “mainstream economists and policymakers” aren’t humans at all but, rather, are aliens from another planet?! These creatures may *seem* to be such to some of us, but I have it on good report that they are all genetically human after all. Which raises the question, then: How does one explain the origin of their (false) “notion” that humans are “selfish, acquisitive, individualistic and competitive by nature”?

Makwana seems to suggest that these seemingly otherworldly creatures have *chosen* the ideology they spout, but this raises the question: If we humans are naturally cooperative, why would any of us *choose* an ideology that asserts otherwise? Does becoming an economist or policymaker somehow magically *transform* a person so that s/he suddenly is *able* to counter his or her natural behavioral proclivities in favor of a “philosophy” that is contrary to his or her natural inclinations—and then *accepts* such an unnatural philosophy?

What I find more plausible as an explanation is that (briefly) societal changes since the Agricultural Revolution explain the emergence of this ideological thinking, and policies based on it:

- The growth in the *scale* of societies, which (somehow) led to the emergence of social class (or caste) systems, with members of the upper classes being *able* to impose their wills on members of lower classes—and *doing* so.
- The development of individualistic *ideas*—e.g., as a part of the development of Protestantism (which also “contributed” the notion that we humans are naturally “sinful”).
- Further development of such ideas by philosophers such as [Thomas Hobbes](#) and [John Locke](#).
- The development of *technology*—encouraged by the developing intellectual atmosphere—which contributed to a growing materialistic orientation. [1]

This is, of course, an extremely sketchy explanation. My main point here, however, is that the ideology in question was not *chosen* but, rather, emerged from developments that occurred over a long period of time, and in response to a great variety of factors. *Because* of how it developed, along with the fact that it has had great influence on how our society has *developed* (and *is* now), that ideology will be difficult to dislodge.

If we humans had been able to retain our cooperative tendencies through and after the Agricultural Revolution, it’s highly likely that world history would have unfolded in a manner very different than it did. But this did not occur—and for good or ill, what we have now are societies within which a very “unnatural” ideology plays a significant role.

The Reason for our Ecological Problems

Makwana’s explanation: “The earth’s ecological problems stem largely from our collective failure to share.” My response: Our current ecological problems may, in some *ultimate* sense, stem from our “our collective failure to share.” It should be clear, however, that the *direct* causes are:

- Western societies are high-energy-usage (on a *per capita* basis) societies dependent on fossil fuels (the burning of which adds to the “[greenhouse effect](#)” to the extent that the result has been causing “climate change”).
- Population is growing rapidly—which *itself* contributes to an increased “greenhouse effect,” given our dependence on fossil fuels for energy.

We have created—if but inadvertently—*societies* that “produce” a whole series of problems as a matter of course, climate change being only the most *serious* one, in that it is the one problem that threatens the very continued existence of societies (and their members). In my view, the more basic reason we have so many problems today is that our *societies* have developed in such a way as to be responsible for those problems. True, some individuals played a more important role in this “evolution” than others, but ultimately (in my opinion) it is the *nature of our societies* that is the source of our problems.

It appears to me that our problems today result not so much from what we *don't* do (share, per Makwana) as from what we *do* do. It's certainly possible that if cooperation had continued during and after the Agricultural Revolution, we wouldn't now be facing the problems that we have. But the fact of the matter is that although our *natures* haven't changed over the millennia, our *societies* have—and it is for *that* reason that ideologies have emerged that *contradict* our natures. Ideologies which, in being acted upon, have helped produce our current mess.

The Importance of Sharing

I agree with Makwana's fourth point, but would qualify that agreement in two ways:

- Makwana does not seem to regard climate change with the seriousness that it deserves. He doesn't seem to recognize that climate change is likely to cull most of the world's population within the next few decades—as indicated, e.g, by his statement: “The real challenge is reducing consumption levels in industrialised nations”
- On the one hand he seems to place a great deal of faith in governments (e.g., his discussion of a “Global Commons Trust”), but in asserting “Without a global movement of ordinary people that share a collective vision of change, it will remain impossible to overcome the influence of neoliberal ideology and the vested interests,” he seems to be calling for a global movement of “ordinary” people—without, however, specifying precisely *what* these “ordinary” people should do.

My view—as I have expressed it in numerous previous essays on this site—is that:

- The leadership in solving our problems—including that of “climate change”—will need to come from private individuals and NGOs, rather than governments—for the reason that governments tend to be dominated by elites, and those elites have a vested interest (but only a short-run one!) in seeing our problems continue.
- What this leadership needs to do is begin a movement to create *communities* that, on the one hand, are designed to withstand the ravages of climate change (e.g., be as self-

sufficient as possible) while simultaneously providing for their residents—*all* of them—a decent way of life.

“Decent” way of life includes many components—as I have tried to make clear in my previous essays and my [eBook](#)—but the cooperation that Makwana rightly prizes is certainly one of them.

Endnote

1. One of the topics that has interested [Philip Slater](#) is technology—its negative consequences, as well as the questionable motivations behind technological development. For example, in his [Earthwalk](#) (1974, p. 34) he stated: “Technological growth will sag drastically when the motivational pathology that drives it dries up, and there are signs that this has already begun to happen. On the other hand, if it does not happen soon, the current impetus of technology is sufficient to destroy the planet in thirty years [i.e., by 2004], and this also has begun to happen.”

I regard Slater as one of our most brilliant intellectuals of the past few decades, and although his view that the drive to create ever-more technology is a pathological one may be viewed by most Americans as “off the wall,” I tend to agree with Slater on this matter. However, I also believe that just because pathological motivations may have been behind technology developments in the past, it does not follow that such motivations *must* be associated with technology development. For that reason, I favor the development of “[appropriate technology](#),” provided that such development occurs in an institutional setting that values and conduces egalitarianism (and other positive values, see my eBook).

Slater’s assertion that “the current impetus of technology is sufficient to destroy the planet in thirty years [i.e., by 2004]” was remarkably “on target”—given that the ravages of global warming are now beginning to be noticeable.

The “Free Enterprise” Fraud

Alton C. Thompson

Forty-one years ago the late [Lewis F. Powell, Jr.](#), (a lawyer) wrote a [memo](#) to Eugene Snyder of the U. S. Chamber of Commerce. Powell—later appointed to the U. S. Supreme Court by President Richard M. Nixon—argued in (what has come to be known as the) “Powell Memorandum” that: “No thoughtful person can question that the American economic system is under broad attack. This varies in scope, intensity, in the techniques employed, and in the level of visibility.” Powell’s purpose in writing the memo, then, was to “identify the problem, and suggest possible avenues of action for further consideration.”

Powell noted that there “always have been some who opposed the American system, and preferred socialism or some form of statism (communism or fascism).” However, Powell claimed that at the time of his writing the memo (in 1971) that we “are not [now] dealing with sporadic or isolated attacks from a relatively few extremists or even from the minority socialist cadre. Rather, the assault on the [free] enterprise system is broadly based and consistently pursued. It is gaining momentum and converts.” (Makes me scared!! After all, today—October 31, 2012—is Halloween!)

Powell observed that the “assault” on the free enterprise system came, “not unexpectedly, [from] the Communists, New Leftists and other revolutionaries who would destroy the entire system, both political and economic.” However, “the most disquieting voices joining the chorus of criticism come from perfectly respectable elements of society: from the college campus [a “hotbed” of “radical” ideas, of course], the pulpit [damn those preachers, with their “revolutionary” gospel messages!], the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians [I wonder who *they* could be—in 2012?!]. In most of these groups the movement against the system is participated in only by minorities. Yet, these often are the most articulate, the most vocal, the most prolific in their writing and speaking.”

That is, those in our society who are most articulate and vocal in criticizing the free enterprise system (that supposedly exists in the country) tend to be those elements of the population that are the most educated, intelligent, and ethically sensitive!—*dangerous* people, therefore, who are not to be trusted! People such as (he claimed) William [Kunstler](#), Herbert [Marcuse](#), Eldredge [Cleaver](#), Charles [Reich](#)—and Ralph [Nader](#) (!).

Besides discussing the *sources* of the attack, he discussed its *tone*, the facts of apathy and default on the part of business, the campus situation, what can be done (e.g., establish a speakers' bureau, evaluate textbooks, etc.), etc. The assumptions underlying Powell's discussion were that:

- The economic system that the United States has *is* a “free enterprise” one.
- It is—“therefore”—the *best possible* economic system—so that attacks on it are by no means justified. (Shades of [Voltaire's *Candide*](#)!)
- What *makes* the system “good” is that it provides people with the opportunity to make free choices. Now a *Biblical* criterion for judging it as “good” might be that [”There Shall Be No Poor Among You”](#) (referring to [Deuteronomy 15:4](#)), so that one using *that* criterion might make the observation that “free enterprise” systems *do* produce poor people—and therefore are *not* “good.”. The “free enterpriser,” however, would counter that it's inappropriate to judge an economic system on the basis of its societal *effects*, for the sole criterion of relevance is whether it enables one to make “free” choices—and a “free enterprise” economic system, by definition, does precisely that.

All three of these (tacitly-held) assumptions warrant comment, but I limit my attention here to the first assumption, and argue that:

- The United States does *not* have a free enterprise system.
- A free enterprise system is one that exists only *hypothetically*, and *cannot* exist in the real world.

In short, the United States does *not* have a “free enterprise” economic system because such an economic system has only a *hypothetical* existence—and *cannot*, therefore, have a real-world one.

The above assertion suggests two questions:

- What is the *basis* of my claim?
- If *my* claim has merit, why to people (such as Powell) assume—and explicitly suggest—that we *do*, in fact, have a “free enterprise” economic system?

In addressing these two questions, it will be useful to begin by defining “free enterprise system.”

Commonly, a “free enterprise system” is said to have the following characteristics as its essential features:

1. One is free to choose an economic activity to engage in—i.e., to initiate a firm that will produce a good(s) or service(s) for sale to others.
2. One's motive in so doing is to make a profit—to *maximize* one's profit, in fact.
3. Property—the property occupied by firms and by housing units—is privately owned.
4. Competition exists between the firms of a given industry.
5. The consumer is “king”—in that consumer desires are the basis for the products and services that are “marketed” in the economy.
6. Although government *does* have a role to play in the *society* (“provide for the common defence,” [1] in particular), its *proper* role in the *economy* is primarily to ensure that all actors in the economy play by the same set of rules. The *tendency* is for government to “interfere” in the economy's functioning, and this tendency must be minimized, so far as possible.

As the last point above implies, another notable feature of “free enterprise” thinking is that it tends to be *normative*, not just *descriptive*, in nature. That is, what it suggests is that the actors in the economy *should* behave in the above-specified ways, for doing so will, *ceteris paribus*, result in the most efficient use of resources in the economy. (The “*ceteris paribus*” qualification here refers primarily to government playing a limited--a “proper”—role in the economy—i.e., not “interfering.”)

For the purposes of this essay I ignore the normative aspect of “free enterprise” thinking and view such thinking as, rather, simply an attempt at *describing* reality—and specifically question its claim that our economy *is*, in fact, a “free enterprise” one (*not* whether or not it *should* be one).

As to why a “free enterprise” economic system *does* not exist in this country because it *cannot* exist, my *first* point is that the definition *itself* suggests a reason why a “free enterprise” economic system is a fictional, rather than real, phenomenon—**the fact that employees are excluded from the system**. Hypothetically, an economic system *could* consist of actors, all of whom were simultaneously firm owners and consumers—with the only employees associated with any given firm being the *owners themselves*. However, such an economic system exists only in fantasyland; the economy of the United States is a “far cry” from being such an economy. In fact, *no* real-world economy today is “employee free.”

A more fundamental reason, however, for asserting that our economic system *is* not—and *cannot* be—a “free enterprise” one lies in the fact that the *concept* of a “free enterprise” economic system owes its origin to *laissez-faire* “theory, which, in turn, is based on—but is a narrow

version of—the economic ideas put forth by [Adam Smith](#) in the late 1700s (in his [The Wealth of Nations](#), 1776) specifically. What must be recognized regarding Smith is [that](#): “Without a doubt, [\[Isaac\] Newton’s](#) laws [of [mechanics](#), or [motion](#)] radically influenced Adam Smith as he developed his concepts of capitalism.” What this fact implies (for one thing), so far as [laissez-faire](#) “theory” and the “free enterprise” concept are concerned, is that the actors in an economy are perceived—if but tacitly—as (a) identical, including in the respect of (b) being “driven” by the same motivational “force.”

What this implies more specifically is that the actors in an economy (employers all, note) are identical in their (a) interests and (b) abilities (both innate and acquired), and that the “force” that “drives” them is a desire to maximize their *incomes*. Note that *laissez-faire*/free enterprise thinking differs from Newtonian mechanics in that the driving force with the former is assumed to have an *internal* origin, whereas it is an *external* force with Newtonian mechanics (unless one thinks of “mass” as an internal force. In addition, the objects of interest with Newtonian mechanics are *physical* things, whereas the comparable objects with *laissez-faire*/free enterprise thinking are *animate* beings—i.e., human beings.

Both assume, however (if but *tacitly* in the case of *laissez-faire*/free enterprise thinking), that the *objects* in question are similar in *their basic nature*. This means that free enterprise thinking (tacitly) assumes that the actors in an economy are (a) similar in their abilities and (b) knowledge, and (c) are equally-strongly driven to maximize their profits.

Because “free enterprise” thinking (a) excludes employees, (b) assumes incorrectly that employers are similar in their abilities and (c) knowledge, and (d) assumes incorrectly that employers are equally strongly driven to maximize their profit, it should be clear that **“free enterprise” thinking pertains to a *hypothetical* situation, not a *real-world* one. Because, then, a “free enterprise” system *cannot exist in the real world*, it is erroneous to claim that the United States *does* have a “free enterprise” economic system.**

Why, then, have people such as Lewis Powell assumed, or claimed, that the United States *does* have a “free enterprise” economic system? I would suggest three reasons:

- Various means exist to divert the attention of the populace away from the (rather unpleasant) fact that our economy is highly inegalitarian, and becoming more so—with the claim that we have a free enterprise economic system being one of those ploys.
- Insofar as members of the populace are aware of the fact that our society *is* highly inegalitarian, the *claim* that we have, though, a “free enterprise” economic system helps to rationalize, to *justify*, that inequality—by suggesting that everyone receives what they

deserve: The rich are rich because have worked hard, and played by the rules, and have thereby earned their wealth; the [poor are poor](#) because they are [lazy](#), etc.[2]

- By promoting this philosophy of *desert* (which is a “blame the victim” philosophy), the rich and their lackeys hope that a result is that the poor will *blame themselves* for their poverty—and therefore be quiescent.

(Note that the above facts regarding “free enterprise” suggest that it is profoundly contrary to the values associated with Judaism and Christianity—an embarrassing fact for a country within which Christianity and Judaism are the dominant religions. It’s been [said](#), however, and recently, regarding our country:

It has no sense of self, and therefore what emerges are a number of triumphalist pseudo-religions that are substitutes for identity - technological progress as a religion, America itself as a religion (consider the rage most Americans go into at even the mildest criticism of America and the way dissent is punished politically and economically), and most idolatrous, free market capitalism as a religion. America claims to be a Christian nation and its people claim to admire Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, and St. Francis of Assisi, but it is obvious that the truth is otherwise. America's real religion is itself and its money-making machinery.

Said, and said *accurately*, I would add!)

It may be that the above “strategy” worked for a number of decades, but when Powell wrote his memo in 1971, it was obvious to him that it was not working *well* then. For although the poor were not causing problems for members of The Establishment, a number of rather intelligent, well-educated, and ethically-sensitive individuals *were* becoming pests. Powell’s memo was, however, heeded by members of The Establishment—so that the rise of right-wing “think tanks” was but one response, and our society has come under the control of Big Money. As a consequence, the presidential election that will be occurring next week will be virtually meaningless.

The fact of Big Money domination is bad enough. But added to this problem is the strong possibility that “global warming” in its various manifestations—including hurricanes!—will be wiping out most of the world’s population within a few decades, and the general public is oblivious of this possibility.

One would, of course, *like* to have some reason to have hope for the future, but if there *is* some reason for hope, I’m not aware of it. (:

Endnotes

1. Advocates of (supposedly) “free enterprise” tend to be strong supporters of the military—but not so much for *defensive* purposes, but *offensive* ones (in both senses of that term!). That is,

they have used the military for imperialistic purposes—in the process “[killing hope](#)” in many parts of the world. The military has been used not only as a means of gaining resources for firms (using public monies for private purposes!) but as a means of enriching firms via military contracts. In other words, hypocrisy has been an “outstanding” characteristic of the advocates of “free enterprise”!

2. [Ayn Rand](#) ideologue Paul Ryan—my “representative” in the U. S. House of Representatives, and running mate (for the presidency) of Mitt Rhombney—states in one of his political advertisements: “If you work hard, and play by the rules, you *should* be able to get ahead.” The suggestion here is that if you work hard, but *don’t* get ahead, government “interference” is the reason.

<http://bravenewworld.in/2012/11/07/human-variability-promise-or-problem/>

Human Variability: Promise or Problem?

Alton C. Thompson

In my recent “[The ‘Free Enterprise’ Fraud](#)” I noted that *laissez-faire* “theory,” and its derivative, “free enterprise” thinking, both assume that the actors in the economy (only employers, I noted!) are similar in (a) interests (their only interest, though, being that of profit maximization), (b) knowledge, and (c) abilities—all of which assumptions are seriously lacking in realism. A question suggested in that essay (but *not* stated explicitly) was: Does the existence of *real-world* differences in people explain why our society is highly [inegalitarian](#)? If not *fully* explain, then explain at least *partially*?

The reason these questions are important to me is that I was raised in Christianity, and the following passage ([I Corinthians 12:12 – 26](#)), authored by Paul of Tarsus, has long haunted me:

¹²Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ²²On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Given that my religious views are rather liberal—as my “[NeWFism: A Religion for the Twenty-First Century](#)” surely demonstrates!—I tend to ignore the sectarian aspects of this passage in favor of what might be termed a *sociological* interpretation. And what this passage suggests to me is that a *group* (and perhaps even an entire *society*) can usefully be thought of as analogous to a human body—and that this has several implications of importance:

- Just as the various parts of a human body are necessary for the body's proper functioning, the same is true of the individuals comprising a group (or society).
- Just as a human body *needs* to consist of a variety of kinds of parts, so not only *will* a given group or society consist of individuals with varying interests, levels/kinds of knowledge, and types/levels of ability, but it *must* have such variety for the proper functioning of the group or society.
- Just as the various components of a body *do* “work” together, thereby enabling the body itself to live, so *can* the individuals in a group or society work together equally (or *almost* so!) smoothly—even though, unlike body parts, they are not *physically* connected, and each individual in a group or society is capable of *making* decisions independently of others, and then *acting* on those decisions.

Was it a matter of wishful thinking on Paul's part to think that a *group* could function much like a human *body*? Or, rather, is this something that is potentially *realizable*? My position on this question is that the latter is the case, and that there is an abundance of evidence from a variety of sources that support that position—anthropological studies of contemporary “primitive” groups, archeological research, historical research, and recent experimental research. However, despite that fact, I do not wish to explore that literature in this essay.

Rather, using that body of (unidentified here) research as the basis for my believing that the Good Society is *possible*—*despite* the fact that individuals vary in their characteristics—I begin with the fact that individuals *do* vary and ask: *What role—if any—does that fact play in explaining why our society is highly inegalitarian currently?*

The basic question to ask here is: What *factors* operating on the fact of human variability explain the development of a highly inegalitarian condition in our society over the past century or so?

The first factor that I would identify here is a “[macho](#)” [mentality](#) (also see [this](#)), a mentality fostered by competitive sports. However, given that that factor has been with us for centuries, its *current* role is more as a “constant” than a “variable.” That is, although it *is* an explanatory factor, it cannot explain *change over time*.

In explaining change over time—i.e., the development of a high degree of inequality—I will present just a sketch, but one that, I believe, has a high degree of explanatory power. I use as my starting point an article published by [Thorstein Veblen](#) 120 years ago, “Some Neglected Points in the Theory of Socialism.” [1]

Veblen's starting point was the assumption that (p. 392) "Man as we find him to-day has much regard to his good fame—to his standing in the esteem of his fellow-men. This characteristic he always has had, and no doubt always will have." That is, Veblen began his argument with the assumption that an abiding feature of human nature is that any human has an innate need to be thought of well by others. If one is living in a "primitive" society—or in a small town in contemporary [1892] America—one will know all other members of one's "community"—and those others will know you as well, of course. Thus, one will be judged, by others, on the basis of one's *behavior*—in the light of the mores that prevail in one's "community."

The (p. 392) "existing [i.e., in 1892] organization of society," however, presents difficulties in satisfying this need. What characterizes modern society is that it is becoming ever more urbanized. People are moving from rural areas to cities (with many immigrants also landing in cities), especially drawn by the industries located there, and in finding a place to live likely know none of their neighbors. Over time one may come to know some of one's neighbors, and be known by them. But what about the hundreds of others that one encounters—in stores, in theaters, while walking down the street, etc.? One will encounter numerous others whom one will *never* get to know. How does one "announce" to them the sort of person one is? Veblen's answer (p. 393): "To sustain one's dignity—and to sustain one's self-respect—under the eyes of people who are not socially one's immediate neighbors, it is necessary to display the token of economic worth, which practically coincides pretty closely with economic success."

What Veblen suggested, then, is that this tendency of "human nature"—developed under circumstances very unlike an urban-industrial society—will, in coming in contact with such a society, be forced to adjust, and the adjustment (in 1892) took the form of focusing one's life on achieving economic success. For Veblen, however, *that* was not the ultimate "goal." It was merely a *means* to the goal of being able to purchase many (expensive) things, and then displaying them—"conspicuously," Veblen added. This would satisfy a psychological need that had developed millennia earlier—if not perfectly, then at least in the best possible manner under the circumstances.

Veblen's analysis ended at this point, but I would *continue* his line of reasoning (I would like to think!) in the form of a developmental scenario:

1. As the income of a person increases, and s/he spends more on conspicuous consumption, one type of "product" on which money will be spent is housing. This will require moving to an area currently basically devoid of housing—at the edge of the city. Given that others have the same desire, housing developments are created in suburban areas for those with above-average incomes.

2. Whereas the initial segregation that may have existed in the city of one's residence was primarily on ethnic and racial bases, it becomes more based on *income* differences.
3. If one has an above-average income and lives near others with a similar income, one will tend to associate more and more with others of one's own class. One will be able to feel equal to one's neighbors, but not superior. Thus, as one income increases, one will feel a need to move to a *different* area—one with higher-income residents (likely a more distant suburb).
4. Making money will come to dominate one's thinking more and more; and, more and more, *how* one gains one's money, from an ethical standpoint, will become less and less important (Mitt Rhombney being an excellent *current* example!).
5. Children will acquire values, not so much from being *taught* them, as from observation of their parents and from their association with peers at school (a *boarding* school, in many cases).
6. As children grow up acquiring their values, they will tend to be even more money-hungry than their parents.
7. The family may attend a church, but that church's leaders will not call into question their parishoners' value system because to do so would mean a loss of members—and, thereby, their own jobs. (Although some clergy may *sense* this problem, few are likely to fully *recognize* it!)
8. One's contacts with others—on a social basis—tend to become ever more limited to people with similar incomes—and values. That interaction tends to both *reinforce* one's values and give them a more selfish thrust.
9. The erosion of values that occurs as one's income increases gets reflected in the increased use of questionable business practices (e.g., the "[Bain business model](#)") and the [off-shoring of money](#) to avoid taxes. It also gets reflected in using one's wealth to hire lobbyists to gain contracts that enable one to "feed from the government's trough" (e.g., via "defense" contracts) and gain tax advantages that help increase one's wealth even further.[2]
10. The society becomes ever-more inegalitarian because of the situations people are in, the habits they acquire, and the fact that they are not challenged to develop a "better" value system by existing religious institutions. And as it *becomes* more inegalitarian, it suffers the [effects](#) of that situation.

Granted that the above “scenario” provides just a sketch of the process by which our society has become highly inegalitarian (and is becoming ever more so), but I’m convinced that it identifies some of the key factors behind that development. In addition, I’m convinced that it takes the *form* necessary for explaining historical development—in that it involves historical changes in, and interactions among, certain variables to explain the “Y” (i.e., dependent) variable—the development of inequality in this case.

Those who *defend* the existence of inequality tend not to use a developmental approach, arguing instead that inequality is simply the result of *differences* between people in, e.g., the effort they expend. Such an approach to explanation, in this case, strikes me as profoundly “wrongheaded.” Thus, although the explanation that I offer above is admittedly meager, it has more merit, I believe, than any explanation that uses a non-developmental approach.

Not only do I perceive a developmental explanation as the *appropriate* sort of explanation for explaining the rise of inequality. What I sense in such an explanation is that provides one not only with a *basis* for hope that a Good Society can be created, but a *solid basis* for such hope. For what such an explanation suggests is that although history unfolded in a certain way in response to certain factors, our *understanding* of those factors enables us to conclude that history did not *have* to unfold in the way that it actually did.

We humans (supposedly) have intelligence, the ability to make decisions, and the ability to learn from past experiences. Given these traits, it follows that at any given moment what happens is not *determined* but, rather, subject to developing in any number of directions. Given these facts, if one has a desired direction in mind and is aware of the causative factors then operating, one can *use* one’s knowledge and vision to shape the future. One does not, obviously, have *perfect* control over how history unfolds (because of the constant presence of unknowns), but one *does* have *some* ability to shape the future. This is “good news” because the threat posed by global warming makes the human future appear bleak indeed!

Endnotes

1. In (pp. 387 – 408) [*The Place of Science in Modern Civilisation and Other Essays*](#). New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918. This article originally appeared in the *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. II, 1892.
2. Chris Hedges—who recently [asserted](#) that “those who hunger for power are psychopathic bastards”—has said of the rich: “Our masters rely on our labor to make them wealthy, on our children for cannon fodder in war[,] and on our collective chants for adulation. They would otherwise happily slip us rat poison. When they retreat into their inner sanctums, which they keep hidden from public view, they speak in the cold words of manipulation, power[,] and

privilege, words that expose their visions of themselves as entitled and beyond the reach of morality or law.” And: “The elite deeply fears any art, literature, philosophy, poetry, theology and drama that challenge the assumptions and structures of authority. These disciplines must appear to the public only in bastardized forms, packaged as froth, entertainment or sentimental drivel that celebrates the established hierarchy.” And: “The only recognizable basis for moral and political authority, in the eyes of the elite, is the attainment of material success and power. It does not matter how it is gotten. The role of education, the elites believe, is to train us vocationally for our allotted positions and assure proper deference to the wealthy. Disciplines that prod us to think are—and the sneering elites are not wrong about this—‘political,’ ‘leftist,’ ‘liberal[,]’ or ‘subversive.’ And schools and universities across the country are effectively stomping out these disciplines.” Given that Hedges was sent to a boarding school at an early age, he speaks with some authority on these matters.

Some Reflections on Hurricane Sandy

Alton C. Thompson

Eugene Robinson begins his recent “[Keeping the Storm at Bay](#)” essay this way:

Let me propose an initiative for the next administration, starting with Day One: Get the nation started on the surge barriers, flood walls and other big infrastructure projects that can protect our coastal cities from being ravaged by the next Hurricane Sandy.

He continues: “. . . if we have higher seas and bigger storms, we’re going to have more catastrophic flooding of the kind we saw last week [as a consequence of Hurricane Sandy].”

The problem with Robinson’s proposal is that it is based on a rather limited view of what “global warming” will entail. True, global warming will involve—and is already involving!—a rise in sea level and an increase in the number of severe storms. But when Prof. Kevin Anderson (an advisor to the British government on climate matters) [states](#) that we are on course for a 4° C. increase in the global mean by 2060 CE (since the baseline of 1750 CE), and asserts that such an increase would likely mean a loss *of 90% of the world’s population*, it becomes clear that “keeping the water out” is just *one* of the problems that we will face in the future.

For one thing, the *increase* in the global mean will *not* occur at a steady rate—thereby giving us time to adjust to the increase. Rather, once a “tipping point” is crossed, the rate of increase *itself* will begin to increase, making adaptation all the more difficult. Some scientists say that we will be crossing that “point of no return” soon, others that it’s conceivable that we already have. After all, how is one to know for sure, given that although there have been “state changes” in the past, the one in our future will result from a unique cause—so that for that reason, knowledge of past such events provides little guidance for making predictions about what *will* be happening.

Not only is the *rate* of change likely to increase. What’s significant are the *implications* associated with that change in rate:

- An increase in the number of storms.
- An increase in their severity.
- A decrease in the predictability of weather phenomena—in *how much* precipitation will fall, and in what *form* (e.g., rain, hail, snow), and *when* during a given year.

The significance of severe storms is in the (a) loss of life, (b) property damage, and (c) disruption in living associated with them—and no one would deny that these aren't all highly important effects. But I would argue that the loss in an ability to predict weather conditions with a high degree of accuracy is even more important, for two reasons:

- A farmer, faced with weather uncertainty, is faced with the question of what to produce during the next “growing season”—and may very well guess wrong, with a consequent diminishment, or even complete loss, of production.
- A farmer may guess right, so that his/her production develops well—but is then suddenly destroyed, or severely diminished, by, e.g., a hail storm or extremely heavy rainfall.

In either case, the net result is that the quantity and quality of food produced during a given year is diminished—and this becomes more of a problem from year to year. ***This loss of food, combined with a growing population, is a recipe for disaster.*** The problem will be more severe in some areas than others, but from a *world* standpoint it will become a *growing* problem, for it will mean:

- Starvation will become a serious problem.
- As will disease—in part because of people becoming weakened because of an inadequate amount of food.
- Violence—including suicide—will become a problem as people become desperate.

When Prof. Anderson declares as a strong possibility that global warming will cull 90% of the world's population by 2060, I would guess that it is the above three factors—rather than, e.g., storms—that will be the culprits.

In light of the above discussion, I must admit that I find Eugene Robinson's “infrastructure projects” proposal to be naïve—and dangerous. Robinson may regard Hurricane Sandy as a “wake-up call,” but *his* “waking up” involves only an extremely partial “waking up.” Robinson is limiting his thinking to “higher seas and bigger storms,” and ignoring more important effects likely to be associated with global warming. Because his is a Little Picture view of global warming, his proposal is actually worse than worthless—because it lulls us into thinking that the puny measures that he advocates are a long-run solution, thereby inhibiting us from engaging in activities of more long-range importance.

Rebuilding efforts are likely to occur in the area devastated by Hurricane Sandy, and it's even possible that Robinson's proposal will be implemented. But such efforts will be of only a *short-term* nature, and will do nothing to address the long-term effects likely to be associated with global warming.

The *long-term* solution is not to engage in *mitigation* efforts—having the purpose of halting the “progress” of global warming—for it is now *too late* for such efforts to be effective. The long-term solution to the problem—insofar as there *is* one, I must add!—is to engage in *adaptive* efforts.

Such efforts should have three components:

- Moving *from* areas most likely to suffer from severe storms—which would include abandoning New York City!
- Moving *to* areas least likely to suffer from the effects of global warming.
- Establishing at the new location a way of life that is as self-sufficient as possible—especially from a food production standpoint, for as our society begins to collapse within a few decades, if one is not able to produce one's own food, one is likely to starve to death!

As I have noted in previous posts, developing a self-sufficient way of life could take the form of homesteading, but the preferable form would be a communitarian one.

Hurricane Sandy *should* be perceived as a “wake up” call to take global warming seriously, but I have no expectation whatsoever that it *will* be. It's as if we want to make Prof. Anderson's 90% prediction come true! How pathetic! What is especially objectionable regarding the likely response to this tragedy is that those with lower incomes—who are *already* “screwed” by the system—are likely to be hurt even more, as Naomi Klein notes in her recent “[Superstorn Sandy](#)” article.

Why Salvation is Unlikely

Alton C. Thompson

the sociopaths who run massive corporations, and are only concerned about profit instead of people, are continually planning about how to make sure their evil plans work out. On the other hand, your average non-evil person has no plan at all about stopping evil or making sure "goodness" prevails. We just stumble through life thinking everyone should treat each other right and maybe play some frisbee golf.

—Lee Camp, "[Evil People Have Plans](#)"

Camp is right in stating that (what might be called) the "Corpocrats" have plans. He should have added, however, that not only do they *have* plans, but they *act* on their plans—being *able* to do so because of their access to an abundance of resources. He should also have added, however, that the fact that the "average non-evil person has no plan at all" is not, *in itself*, a problem. What *makes* it a problem is that actions caused by the Corpocrats impact the non-evil majority *negatively*—and such people are either not aware of this fact, or are aware, but feel helpless to do anything about it.

Actions instigated by the Corpocrats impact the non-evil majority in both direct and indirect ways: *Directly* via their exploitative activities, conducted through a process that makes their culpability difficult to determine; *indirectly*, through their control of an economy that they have made dependent on the use of fossil fuels. A *Forbes* writer has recently [declared](#) this latter claim "argle barge"—by which he apparently means "nonsense;" and has argued that the *consumer*, rather, is responsible for our dependence of fossil fuels:

For it isn't true at all that the fossil fuel companies strap us down and insist that we partake of their products. We are not placed in a straitjacket and force fed oil, no one comes around at night and illicitly sprinkles coal on the backyard and no one at all pipes gas into our cookers so that we must burn it or blow the house up.

And expects people to believe such "balderdash"—by which *I* mean "nonsense"! Ideologues like to claim, of course, that the "consumer is king" in our economy—which is true to a point: If alternatives are available to the consumer, s/he is able to make choices among the alternatives. But the "energy market" is of a very different nature—one in which the consumer has little choice other than to use fossil fuels.

The negative direct and indirect effects of Corpocrat actions on the "average non-evil person" are both important, but I would place especial importance on the above-mentioned *indirect* effect—

making us dependent on fossil fuels. The reason: The burning of fossil fuels involves a transfer of carbon from below the earth's surface to the atmosphere (in the form of carbon dioxide, CO₂), which transfer results directly in an increased "greenhouse" effect. The *presence* of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is essential for our existence, but if the *level* of that presence becomes "excessive," the result is a warming of the atmosphere.

That warming is *itself* a problem, but so are the atmospheric phenomena associated with that warming:

- An increase in the number of storms.
- An increase in their severity (the recent Hurricane Sandy being an example).
- An increase in weather variability at any given location—meaning greater unpredictability in weather conditions during the year.

The terms "global warming" and "climate change" are commonly used to refer to this complex of changes, and increasingly those changes are being recognized as presenting real problem for humans—including members of the Corpocrat class. Given this, the question has arisen: What can we *do* about this problem?

I need to add here, however, that only *some* have raised this question. Members of the Corpocrat class tend to be too fixated on making money to be interested in what's happening to the world around them; and although members of this class *should* be intelligent enough to realize that they will—eventually, at least—suffer from the consequences of global warming just like the rest of us, paradoxically they don't seem to be able to *use* their intelligence to come to grips with this (obvious!) fact.

The "average non-evil person" in our society also does not ask this question—but for a different reason. In the average person's case global warming is simply not on his or her "mental map." The primary reason for this is that the press in this society is a *corporate* enterprise owned and controlled by Corpocrats—whose interest is not so much in *informing* the public as *diverting* their attention away from what is going on in the world. If one *does* want to learn "what's going on in the world," one needs to go to specialized periodicals and other publications, and to certain web sites—something that the "average non-evil person" tends not to do.

From the above facts—as Camp put it, the fact that there are planners and non-planners in our society—it appears that our situation, as humans, is hopeless. But wait! There's Bill McKibben, who for a number of years now has been doing battle with the Corpocrats—those Corpocrats in the fossil fuel industry in particular. For example, he recently made the [suggestion](#) that hurricanes should be named for fossil fuel companies rather than women. And recently he

[announced](#) a “Do the Math” tour of the United States, the name of the tour derived from his recent *Rolling Stone* [article](#). Evidently the purposes of the campaign are to educate people and encourage them to take creative actions against the fossil fuel companies:

For the climate activists at [350.org](#) [an organization McKibben helped create], it didn't necessarily matter who won the election on Tuesday. Their post-election plan—long in the works—was to take direct aim at the fossil fuel industry. The group says quite frankly that to build the movement they believe is necessary, a very different kind of campaign is needed; one that takes its cues from science and—in a very specific sense—mathematics.

"We're up against the most powerful industry in the history of the world," said co-founder Bill McKibben from Seattle ahead of the kick-off show, "But we're playing to win."

My concern, however, is with how *effective* this campaign is likely to be—especially in light of the following two strong possibilities:

- A “tipping point” has either been reached, or soon will be, so far as “climate change” is concerned. This refers to the point where the rate of change will *itself* begin to increase—with the *negative* feedback mechanisms that had been maintaining relative stability giving way to *positive* feedback mechanisms that will do just the opposite.
- Prof. Kevin Anderson (an advisor to the British government on climate change matters) has stated that we are on course for a 4° C. increase in the global mean temperature by 2060 CE, and that the implication of such an increase is a severe culling of the world's population (Anderson has given the figure of 90%!).

Now if a tipping point has been crossed, or soon will be, the implication is that even if we humans were to stop pouring greenhouse gases into the atmosphere *today*, global warming would continue—and no mitigation efforts would be able to halt that “progress.” This strong possibility leads me to declare that McKibben's “Do the Math” tour is pointless. But *that's* too weak a statement; a more accurate statement would be: **Conducting this tour is *dangerous*, for it diverts attention away from the tipping point possibility, and *thereby* diverts attention away from where it *should* be focused, rather.**

It should be obvious—but apparently isn't to Bill McKibben—that the likelihood of crossing a climate change tipping point, in conjunction with the likelihood that this will mean a severe culling of the human population *within a few decades*, means that switching to alternate energy sources is an answer that is “too little, too late.” There is only *one option* available to us humans at present—and even *that* option will not prevent a tremendous loss of the world's population. The answer that I'm referring to is that of *adaptation*, regarding which I have said much in previous essays, and so will not comment further on here.

During the course of his campaign McKibben may convince some “average non-evil” people to join him—it’s unlikely he will convince any Corpocrats—but this fact should make one depressed, rather than delighted. For it simply provides further proof of the unpleasant possibility that “salvation is unlikely.”

Why can’t McKibben see that his campaign is not only pointless but dangerous? I can only guess, but would suggest he *does* recognize this in his unconscious, but is so committed to a middle class way of life that he is forced to suppress that truth—and is using his activism as a means to do so. The suppression is, of course, occurring on an unconscious level, so that he is not aware of what is *really* driving his activism.

As I have little background in Psychology, the above speculation must be taken with a “grain of salt,” of course. I *do*, however, find the explanation to be plausible.

And if my explanation is *not* the correct one, what *is* a reasonable explanation for why McKibben is unable to recognize the foolishness—and worse—of his current tour, and recognize instead the necessity of engaging in adaptive efforts if we are to have *any* chance of saving our species—or at least saving some semblance of a civilized existence? I mean it! Give me a *better* answer, if you can!

Religion in a Societal System

Alton C. Thompson

Societies are *systems*—meaning that their various components “work” together to enable the system to continue in existence. In a very real sense, then, a societal system is closely analogous to a living entity. Two qualifications are in order, however, regarding societal systems:

- Within a given societal system one component tends to be *dominant*, with the other—the subservient—components “serving” this dominant component.
- Societal systems are subject to *change* (technology development being one of the key agents of change), so that the dominant component at *one* point in time may not be at a *later* point in time. Changes may even occur in the *nature of the dominant component*—so that although the *Economy* component has been dominant one in the West for several centuries now, the *nature* of the dominant component itself has changed—from commerce to manufacturing industry to (now) finance.

An additional—and provocative—claim was made 26 years ago regarding societal systems—capitalist ones in particular—by Peter Berger (in *The Capitalist Revolution*, 1986, p. 113):

The world erected by capitalism is indeed a “cold” one. Liberating though it may be, it also involves the individual in countless relations with other people that are based on calculating rationality. . . . There is, therefore, an overriding need for a world of “warmth” to balance all [of] this “coldness.” Family, church, private friendships, and freely formed associations have provided this balance throughout the development of bourgeois cultures.

That is, in a capitalist society people are typically involved in interpersonal relationships that can be characterized as “cold.” Because of differences between people in interests and abilities, the exploitation of some by others occurs, a result being the emergence of a high degree of inequality within the society. Because *that* development poses a threat to the society’s continued existence, the society’s subservient components develop “warmth” to counterbalance the “cold” introduced into the society by capitalism—and *that* development enables the society to then continue in existence.

Does this thesis have merit? Granted that it is an interesting thesis that seems, on the surface, to be highly plausible? But is it a thesis that will stand up to scrutiny? I will argue here that “family,” “private friendships,” and “freely formed associations” tend to add “warmth” to a capitalist society, but that *religion* is a more “mixed bag.” (Note that Berger’s list does not

include the *educational system*—perhaps because *that* system tends to serve the interests of capitalists rather directly—especially once basic language and mathematical skills are conveyed to students.)

What I will argue in this essay is that religion *basically* serves the interests of capitalists, but does so in a variety of ways: After all, “religion” is not a monolithic entity in a capitalist society but, rather, consists of a number of different *denominations*. In a sense, then, although I will primarily be showing how the various subcomponents of a society’s religion provide *support* to the society’s capitalists, I will simultaneously be offering an explanation of sorts regarding *why* these various subcomponents developed in the first place.

My starting point here is to use the United States as my “study area,” and to recognize that the dominant religions in this country to date have been Christianity and Judaism. Given that the former religion grew out of the latter—and can best be characterized as a “paganized” version of the latter—the following passage from [Matthew 25](#) can perhaps be thought of as summarizing the “message” of both religions:

³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

I will qualify this “summary” later, but initially this passage will serve as an adequate “benchmark.” What follows, then, is a discussion of different religious “orientations”—rather than denominations *per se*—with an indication, in each case, of *how* that “orientation” serves the interests of capitalists—and *whether* it relates to the above passage in Matthew. Given that my own exposure has primarily to Christianity (rather than Judaism), my discussion focuses on variations within Christianity.

- Some branches of Christianity primarily offer their parishioners *emotional release*. Those attracted to such a version of Christianity are primarily those whose lives are rather miserable, and the opportunity for emotional release offered by these churches helps them cope—and continue to function as cogs in the capitalist machine. This version of Christianity has no bearing on the passage from Matthew, however (!).
- Other branches strive to get their parishioners to focus on a (supposed) afterlife—presented as “heavenly” in comparison with their current miserable earthly lives. (“[There’ll be pie in the sky, bye and bye](#).”) Again, such churches help their parishioners

cope—and thereby to continue to function as cogs in the capitalist machine. Again, this version of Christianity has no (or little) bearing on the Matthew passage.

- Still other branches encourage their parishioners to become interested, and engaged, in such issues as abortion and gay marriage. On the one hand, this enables parishioners to divert their attention from the “commands” of Matthew 25, while also not question the Existing Capitalist Order. Given the latter, they pose no threat to that Order.
- For other branches “religion” is presented as involving primarily learning the various stories in the Bible. Because one merely *learns* these stories and is not encouraged to use them as models for *one’s own* behavior, one is not only encouraged to ignore the *message* of the Bible, but encouraged—in effect, at least—to be accepting of the Existing Capitalist Order.
- Closely related to this “orientation,” is one having an emphasis on proper belief. In this case, being “religious” involves accepting, as true, various (“fundamental”) propositions—such as “Jesus was born of a virgin,” “Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins,” etc. Again, this diverts the attention of parishioners from the message of the Bible while also causing to accept, without question, the Existing Capitalist Order.

I suspect that this “orientation” is especially attractive to lower-middle class people—i.e., people whose lives are not miserable, but whose position in the society makes them feel inferior. By “latching onto” a set of (weird) beliefs, such people can feel that they possess important knowledge not possessed by others, and thereby feel that in certain ways, at least, they are actually superior to others. In a sense, [Mitt Rhombney](#) falls into this category, but is a special case. (Rhombney’s position within Mormonism helps explain why a person of his wealth would profess—or *claim* to!—the strange ideas associated with Mormonism. I find it of interest that although [most Mormons](#) voted for Rhombney instead of Barack Obama in the last presidential election, the [Salt Lake City Tribune](#)—located in the heart of Mormon country—did *not* support his candidacy! Perhaps because they believed that Rhombney was a [better American](#) than Mormon.)

- Another “orientation”—this one associated more with upper class, educated parishioners—is one wherein the view promulgated regarding being “religious” is to participate in various rituals. With such an “orientation” one is never exposed to the “radical” message of the Bible, and is enabled to live one’s life in a privileged position with a clear conscience—and one poses no threat whatsoever to the Existing Capitalist Order.
- The extreme—but rather different—version of this “orientation” is one that preaches a “success” gospel. This version—associated especially with television “evangelists”—

combines a degree of emotionalism with a message that is directly contrary to the message of the Bible. It attracts lower-middle class people in particular—people whose lives are not desperate, but who wish to become more “successful.” Obviously, this particular “orientation” hardly deserves the label “religious” at all, being instead a “religified” version of capitalism *per se*.

- The last “orientation” that I will mention here is one that (in effect at least) takes the above Matthew 25 passage as its starting point—and interprets that passage in a manner deemed appropriate for the society as it is currently, and for individual people’s interests and talents. Unfortunately, this version of Christianity is of minor importance relative to the other “orientations.” More to the point, however, is the fact that this version of Christianity poses no more of a threat to the Existing Capitalist Order than any of the other versions discussed above.

Can we conclude from the above discussion that religion—Christianity in the United States in particular—provides the “warmth” that Peter Berger claimed of it? It would seem that Berger was only *partially* right: Those for whom church attendance allows emotional release there is “warmth” (and the same goes for those in this group who consider themselves “saved”); and those for whom church attendance encourages service to others (the meaning that Quakers give to “service”!) will typically find that [“doing good” helps them “feel good.”](#) Beyond these two exceptions, however, there is little basis for Berger’s claim that religion provides “warmth” to counteract capitalism’s “cold.” What *can* be said regarding religion in America, however, is that ***none of its various orientations poses any sort of threat to the Existing Capitalist Order***—what Thomas Frank (*Harpers*, November, 2012, p.9) has referred to recently as “the flagrantly rigged casino of American economic life.” (It would seem that Judaism provides a better basis for questioning the Existing Capitalist Order; see, e.g., Peter T. Vogt’s [“There Shall Be No Poor Among You”: Deuteronomy’s Vision and the Christian Church.”](#))

The reason that I regard this conclusion of importance is that in a [recent essay](#) I noted that the threat posed by global warming is such that it is now too late to engage in mitigation efforts, so that our only option now is to engage in adaptation efforts—specifically by working to develop a New Society within the shell of the Existing Order. I noted that clergy are in a good position to provide leadership for such a movement:

The reason that I state that members of the clergy are well-positioned to be leaders in a New Society movement is that:

- Most of them belong to organizations with, and with access to, relevant resources, financial and otherwise.

- Members of their profession tend to be respected, so that the views that they express tend to be taken seriously.
- “Salvation” is their province; they would need only to change their orientation from the salvation of *souls* to the salvation of *lives*—even the salvation of our species from extinction.

But I also added:

However, just because the clergy are well-*positioned* to lead a New Society movement, it does not follow that they are well-*qualified* to do so. Regarding *that* matter they would need to:

- *Develop* qualifications; or
- *Identify* others who are qualified, and encourage/help them become leaders in a New Society movement; or
- *Help* people who are not qualified, but have an interest in becoming so, to become qualified.

What my analysis in *this* essay leads me to conclude is that religion, as it is manifested, in the United States, is too much a “slave” to the Existing Capitalist Order to provide the necessary leadership—which fact adds to my conviction that [“Salvation for Our Society? No Chance!”](#).

I am, of course, reluctant to make such a conclusion—but see no reason *not* to so do.

[<http://bravenewworld.in/2012/11/20/clinging-to-a-shred-of-optimism/>]

Clinging to a Shred of Optimism

Alton C. Thompson

Chris Hedges states, in his most [recent column](#) (entitled “Once Again—Death of the Liberal Class”):

Any mass movement that arises—and I believe one is coming—will be fueled, like the Occupy movement, by radicals who have as deep a revulsion for Democrats as they do for Republicans. The radicals who triumph, however, may not be progressive. Populist movements, from labor unions to an independent press to socialist third parties, have been destroyed in the United States. A protofascist movement that coalesces around a mystical nationalism, that fuses the symbols of the country with those of Christianity, that denigrates reason and elevates mass emotions will have broad appeal. It will offer to followers a leap from the deep pit of despair and frustration to the heights of utopia. It will speak in the language of violence and demonize the vulnerable, from undocumented workers to homosexuals to people of color to liberals to the poor. And this force, financed by the most retrograde elements of corporate capitalism, could usher in a species of corporate fascism in a period of economic or environmental instability.

Hedges continues by stating that, based on his personal experiences in Boston’s inner city, El Salvador and Honduras, and Gaza

I was sickened and repulsed. My loyalty shifted from the state, from any state, to the powerless, to the landless peasants in Latin America, the Palestinians in Gaza or the terrified families in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those who suffer on the outer reaches of empire, as well as in our internal colonies and sacrifice zones, constitute my country. And any action, including voting, that does not unequivocally condemn and denounce their oppressors is a personal as well as a moral betrayal.

I admire Hedges for the life experiences that he has had—and especially for the *attitudes* that he has developed in response to those experiences. My own attitudes overlap considerably with his, but have developed, rather, from my experiences in living only in different parts of the United States (from North Carolina and Maryland to Oregon—with Wisconsin being my place of birth and upbringing, and my residence since 1976) and my reading.

I do *not*, however, foresee a mass movement of a “protofascist” nature developing, my hope being that the movement that *does* emerge will have three characteristics in particular:

- Its members will recognize the threat posed to us humans by “global warming,” will recognize that it’s now too late to halt the “progress” of global warming—so that our only option at present is that of *adaptation*.
- It will recognize that adaptation should take a *communitarian* direction, with the small communities created by the movement located where they will be relatively safe from the ravages of global warming, and designed to be as self-sufficient as possible (regarding food production particularly).
- Communities will be designed with human “[design specifications](#)” in mind—meaning, for one thing, that they will be extremely “liberal” in nature—e.g., they will depend especially on “outcasts” to provide the vanguard for the movement.

Unlike Hedges, I see a real urgency in responding to the threat posed by global warming. I believe that British scientist Kevin Anderson is likely right in stating that we are on course for a 4° C. rise (since 1750 CE) in the earth’s mean temperature by 2060 CE—and that such a rise will mean a severe culling of the world’s population (90% per Anderson). *Because* I take “climate change” extremely seriously, I not only believe that adaptation efforts are our only option now, but that even if such efforts were begun *tomorrow* on a massive scale (which they *won’t* be, of course!), they would not result in much reduction of Anderson’s 90% figure. Some might regard this as a *pessimistic* assumption, but I regard it as a *realistic* one. Events may prove me wrong (and I hope that they do!); but given that I have no reason to question Prof. Anderson’s severe culling claim, I suspect that my beliefs are justified.

My *fear* is that a mass movement of the sort anticipated by Hedges will arise; my firm *conviction*, however, is that it will *only* arise if an adaptation plan (such as mine) is *not* implemented.

Of course, such a plan may *not* get implemented. After all, *I* don’t have the resources to initiate the one I have in mind, nor do I have contact with anyone who might both have the necessary resources and have an interest in the “plan.” In addition, I’m not even confident in my own ability to lead such a movement, should the resources become available that would enable me to initiate it. And if someone, somewhere is *already* implementing an adaptation plan on the order of what I have in mind, it has not come to my attention.

The only reason that I have any degree of optimism at all is that I believe that a “liberal” movement such as the one that I envision *could* be successful, were it initiated—and with the right leadership. I try to cling to some degree of optimism, but am finding it more and more difficult to retain any—as my most recent essays certainly demonstrate.

Ayn Rand's "Wacko" Psychology

Alton C. Thompson

It has been decades since I read [Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*](#), and because I have absolutely no interest in re-reading the book, I will rely here on Jeffrey M. Mikkelson's "[The Antidote to Ayn Rand](#)" for providing a summary of a key portion of her thinking—evidently derived, by Mikkelson, from an analysis of John Galt's lengthy speech in *Atlas Shrugged*:

Rand . . . stresses private moral virtue—an egoistic virtue ethics apparently inspired by Aristotle. Many religions and philosophies embrace an ethic of self-cultivation and autonomy—Buddhism, Stoicism, Protestantism, Existentialism and Pragmatism, to name a few—but only for Rand does this focus on the individual specifically demand a disregard for the well-being of others. Whereas most forms of individualism treat the cultivation of personal virtue as a means of achieving harmony with one's surroundings, Rand considers private and public virtue at odds, as if the former were a kind of spiky armor against the corrupting influence of the latter. Sacrifice, humility and altruism are cardinal vices in Rand's system—examples of Nietzsche's "slave morality." Her list of virtues includes selfishness and pride, making it oddly reminiscent of the virtues the character Commodus arrogates to himself in the movie *Gladiator* just before he murders his father, Marcus Aurelius. The list also includes independence, which is laudable enough, but somewhat belied by Galt himself at the beginning of his speech, where he says of his followers: "I showed them the way to live by another morality—mine. It is mine that they chose to follow." Rounding out the list are productiveness, justice, rationality, honesty and integrity—all perfectly unassailable, at least on some interpretation.

The above passage identifies a number of the values that were important to Rand, but as Mikkelson indicates, *altruism* was, for Rand, one of the cardinal *vices*—and it is this "vice" that I will focus on in the present essay.

The first point that I would make regarding this "vice" is that it is the primary *virtue* promulgated in the (Christian) Bible—as indicated, e.g., by this famous passage from [Matthew 25](#):

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

But that is a *religious* statement of course; and given that my title refers to Rand's "wacko" psychology, it has no place in this essay. Or *does* it?! My answer is that altruistic tendencies emerged during the course of our evolution, and that recent experimental research demonstrates

that we are genetically “programmed” for altruistic and cooperative behavior. I would even add that the behavior of people during the recent Hurricane Sandy disaster provides further—if but “anecdotal”—proof relative to the fact that we are “[born to be good](#).”

Let me begin here with a few comments on human evolution. As virtually everyone knows, Charles Darwin, in his famous *The Origin of Species* (1859), asserted that “natural selection” was the key agent of evolution. Darwin defined that sort of “selection” as resulting from the excess births which are supposedly commonplace with any given species resulting in intra-specific competition, with that competition resulting in the survival of those individuals that “fit” the environment in question but, more importantly, those individuals able to prevail in that competition—because of superior strength, cunning, or whatever. Because it was such individuals who produced progeny (which tended to inherit the traits of their parents), this process occurring over time produced “evolutionary” change. (In actuality, his “model” didn’t produce *evolutionary* change at all, just *monotypic* change—and proved virtually worthless as an explanatory “model” even then.)

Beginning with the fifth edition of *Origin*, Darwin used the phrase “survival of the fittest” (a term he borrowed from [Herbert Spencer](#)) as a synonym for “natural selection”—an unfortunate choice because Spencer’s meaning for the term did not coincide with Darwin’s, which made no reference to fitting the environment, although it *seems* to.

Russian geographer [Peter Kropotkin](#), in a series of articles in the late 1900s, later published as [Mutual Aid](#) (1902), argued that his observations in Siberia provided no evidence in support of Darwin’s explanation, and that it was *cooperation*, rather than intra-specific competition, that appeared to be the ruling behavioral tendency in Nature. He even referred (in the subtitle of his book) to cooperation as a “factor of evolution”—but, unfortunately, provided no theoretical *explanation* comparable to Darwin’s. *That* fact may have been the reason why Kropotkin’s name is not well-known today—although I suspect that the *real* reason for Darwin’s “success” is that his argument for competition was what Victorians—the rising bourgeoisie in particular—*wanted* to hear, for it enabled them to argue that their desire to be competitive was “natural,” thereby providing them with clear consciences.

Although Kropotkin failed to provide an explanation of why humans (and the members of other species also, to varying degrees) had a natural proclivity for cooperative behavior, more recent thinkers have (see, e.g., Steven M. Stanley, [Children of the Ice Age: How a Global Catastrophe Allowed Humans to Evolve](#), 1996; Nancy Makepeace Tanner, [On Becoming Human](#), 1981; and Donna Hart and Robert W. Sussman, [Man the Hunted: Primates, Predators, and Human Evolution](#), 2005). They would argue that our ancestors were tree-dwellers, and that changes in climate forced them to abandon the trees for a terrestrial existence. This forced change in

residence exposed them to predators, and those individuals who happened to be living in groups were best protected—and therefore the most likely to leave progeny.

Those who formed the initial groups may or may not have had cooperative tendencies. But living in a group would result in the *development* of such tendencies via a process of learning—which might then *supplement* any natural tendencies for such behavior that existed. The *reason* that cooperative tendencies would become associated with a given group is that such behavior had *survival value*—with only those individuals that survived producing progeny, of course.

Cooperative behavior would be necessitated not only for defense purposes but for food acquisition purposes; and if certain males of “marriageable” age showed signs of *not* being cooperative (perhaps for genetic reasons), females would tend to choose *not* to mate with them—an important fact because “female-choice sexual selection” is the type of sexual selection that prevailed, and males *not* chosen for mating purposes would leave no progeny behind. Over time, then, not only did cooperative behavior become commonplace with our ancestors, but we became “programmed” for such behavior (although learning—through observation—continued to play a role).

Granted that “altruistic” and “cooperative” do not have the exact same meaning, but if one becomes “programmed” for cooperative behavior, one will simultaneously become “programmed” for altruistic behavior. [1] Which is why I say that ***the nature of our evolution explains why we have a natural tendency to engage in altruistic behavior***. And it follows from *that* fact that the reason why such behavior is less common now than millennia ago is that we have developed “unnatural” ways of life that thwart the expression of our natural tendencies—which tendencies appear in many, though, during crisis periods, and with at least some non-elite people much of the time.

I would summarize the discussion to this point thusly:

- Our species wouldn’t even exist today if our distant ancestors had not formed cooperative groups, which development enabled humans to become “programmed” for cooperative/altruistic behavior—and, at a much later point, enabled Ayn Rand to write (allegedly) “philosophical” books!
- The “injunctions” stated—or at least *suggested*—in Matthew 25 are simply “fleshed out” statements of what people are “programmed” to do, their statement and promulgation in Matthew being necessary because the people of that time were saddled with a way of life that was unnatural—contrary to their “[design specifications](#)” as humans. Granted that my view of our origins is in conflict with the Biblical story of Adam and Eve; but that story

was created during a pre-scientific period when people could only *guess* about human origins.

An additional point worth adding here is that the Christian *teaching* that we are all “God’s children” can—if thoroughly absorbed by a person—have a profound effect on how that person relates to others, so that this *teaching* can reinforce inherited proclivities already present. As a child I remember singing this song in the Assemblies of God church that my parents (who had both been raised in a Norwegian Lutheran church) established with several other couples (the Thompson Hall in that church, in Wautoma, Wisconsin, being named after my dad):

Jesus loves the little children.
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Given what scientists believe regarding human evolution, it should come as no surprise that scientists today, via experimental research, are discovering that human nature (in the sense of inborn behavioral proclivities) has a positive, rather than negative, character. Granted that this fact is in conflict with what we can *observe* regarding human behavior, but the fact of the matter—known by any social scientist—is that *observational* data is of lesser value than data derived from controlled experiments.

Those interested in learning about some of this modern research are directed to the [Greater Good Center](#) at the University of California, Berkeley, the program there led by [Dacher Keltner](#) (author of [Born to be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life](#)). A great deal of valuable information can be accessed from their web site.

I should also mention that the primatological research conducted by [Frans de Waal](#) and associates is also of great value for understanding human nature—e.g., [Peacemaking Among Primates](#), [Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals](#), [Our Inner Ape](#), [Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved](#), and [The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society](#).

In light of the above discussion, “philosopher” Ayn Rand’s view of human nature must be regarded as, at best, ignorant, and, at worst, dangerous. Does, then, the fact that “my” Congressman, Paul Ryan (a nominal member of a Roman Catholic church), has been a devotee of (atheist) Ayn Rand suggest that he has not yet evolved to a truly human state?!

Endnote

1. This statement that if one becomes “‘programmed’ for cooperative behavior, one will simultaneously become ‘programmed’ for altruistic behavior,” needs to be qualified. For although it is fairly clear how cooperative behavior gained a genetic basis with humans, it is less clear how altruistic behavior gained a genetic basis; it seems clear *that* such behavior somehow developed via evolutionary processes, and it’s likely that there is an evolutionary connection between the two types of behavior—with altruistic behavior somehow developing as a *consequence* of cooperative behavior. But the “mechanism” here is not clear.

It’s true that the *interaction* associated with cooperative behavior may very well result in coming to *like* those with whom one is interacting—so that if someone one works with cooperatively becomes hurt, one will not hesitate to offer whatever assistance one can to the hurt individual. In this case, however, the behavioral tendency is a *learned/acquired* one, rather than an *inherited*, one—and if one were to assert that an acquired characteristic such as this could be inherited, one would be guilty of [Lamarckism](#). Or does Lamarckism have some merit after all?!

Continuing the Tradition . . . by Updating It

Alton C. Thompson

The Bible has much to say about poverty and justice; if you removed all the pages which mention justice it wouldn't stand up! (From [here](#).)

The “tradition” to which I am referring here is the (Christian) *Biblical* Tradition. I should note at the outset, however, that my perception of that Tradition is of a rather non-sectarian nature—as anyone would know who has read previous essays of mine that have touched on religion, including my “[NeWFism: A Religion for the Twenty-First Century](#).” I should perhaps add that the recent [Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World](#) (2012), by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, expresses a “philosophy” very close to my own.

Despite the above qualification, I am *specifically* addressing here those who regard the Bible as an *authoritative* source for *personal guidance*—people who believe that the various *injunctions* (i.e., commands, directives)—explicit and implied—stated in the Bible should be taken seriously. Not the more “barbaric” such injunctions, of course—such as *stoning* people to death for certain offenses—but, rather, the positive (“do’s”) and negative (“don’ts”) injunctions that suggest (or imply) how one should relate to one’s fellows (the injunction implicit in the famous [Good Samaritan](#) story being an excellent example).

But even *that* qualification must be further qualified, for my purpose here is not so much to discuss the Tradition *per se* as, rather, to argue that the *updating* of the Tradition attributed to Jesus in the Bible (and commented upon briefly later in this essay) needs to be *continued*. My principal purpose here, then, is to present my views regarding *how* the Tradition should be *further* updated.

Traditions *do* change in nature over time, of course, whether or not the changes that occur are planned—or whether or not those who are a part of the tradition *admit* that changes have occurred. The *problem* with traditions, however, is that they tend to *drift* (thereby becoming *distorted* over time)—or, alternatively, become *deliberately* distorted by people who seek to “use” a given tradition for their own selfish purposes. It’s likely that *both* of these sorts of changes have occurred with Christianity, but it is *not* my purpose here to chronicle the changes that have occurred with Christianity through the centuries (from this, or any other, perspective).

My *principal* purpose here, rather, is limited to presenting some suggestions as to how to update the Biblical Tradition—in a manner that is relevant for the present, while simultaneously retaining the *essence* of that Tradition. Although my intended audience is those who are *currently* a part of the Biblical Tradition—and who sense a need for its updating—my approach here is non-sectarian enough that people in other traditions may find my suggestions of interest—especially given that one of my suggestions is in response to a current problem that *all* of us humans face at present.

A useful starting point here is to recognize that those who regard the Bible's injunctions (the more enlightened ones in particular) as authoritative can be placed into two categories, which I will label as **A** People and **B** People. Following is how these people *differ*:

1. How One Perceives the Bible

- a) **A** people take a “literalistic” approach to the Bible. They believe that every person referred to in the Bible actually existed, and that the words and actions attributed to a given person in the Bible actually occurred. (However, as I will note shortly, such people tend to be less “strict” when it comes to *injunctions*, and often exhibit a strong *cultural* influence when referring to the Bible's injunctions.)
- b) **B** people (of which I am one) are interested in the Bible more as a work (*collection* of works, actually) of *literature*—much as they perceive William Shakespeare's plays. There are three subtypes of such people, however:
 - 1) Those who from a *factual* standpoint are literalistic. (For them, the Bible is an “inerrant” collection of facts. I would add that this is not a tenable view. [1] As Thomas L. Thompson has stated (in [*The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology And The Myth Of Israel*](#), 2000, p. xvi), “the Bible hardly intends to be read as if it were a history book.” And (p. 387), “the Bible texts are not, for the most part, religious texts themselves. They are rather philosophical critiques of religious tradition and practice.”)
 - 2) Those who regard the Bible's statements as part fact, part fiction (I tend to fall into this specific category).
 - 3) Those for whom the Bible is *primarily* a work of fiction—a “fantastic country,” indeed, per Leonard L. Thompson ([*Introducing Biblical Literature: A More Fantastic Country*](#), 1978).

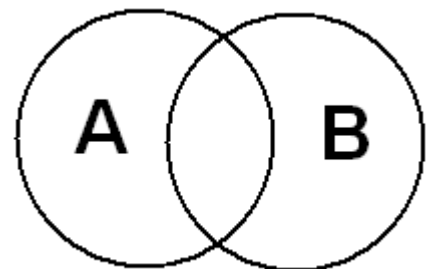
2. Why One Accepts Certain Injunctions

- a) For **A** people the Bible is the “Word of God”—and *that’s* why they believe that the Bible’s injunctions should—*must*, indeed—be obeyed. That is, they believe that the words and events “reported” in the Bible are all *approved* by God—with many of the words uttered by people, and then reported in the Bible, having been *inspired* by God.
- b) **B** people accept the injunctions simply as injunctions that one who strives to be “good” will attempt to follow. (What *makes* them good is not their claimed *origin* but, rather, the observed fact that *following* them results in an increase in the well-being of those affected by actions stemming from the injunctions—and may also result an increase in one’s own sense of well-being.)

3. One’s “Liberality”

- a) **A** people tend to be especially interested in issues related to sexuality, such as same-sex marriage and abortion. They claim a Biblical basis for opposing, e.g., homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and abortion. **A** people tend to vary in their degree of interest in social issues such as poverty, with most of them, however, *not* seeming to have much interest in such issues—for their intellectual orientation tends to be *individualistic* rather than *societal*, and their interest is more in what people should *not* do than in what they *should* do. In short, **A** people tend to approach the Bible’s injunctions from a *negative* perspective whereas **B** people tend to be more interested in the Bible’s *positive* injunctions.
- b) **B** people do not necessarily dispute the claim that the Bible teaches against homosexuality, same-sex marriage, abortion, etc., but would place such teachings in the same category as the injunction to stone to death those who have committed certain offenses (except that they might note that stoning people is in conflict with the “thou shalt not kill” command). What **B** people would argue in the case of homosexuality is that it is an inherited, rather than acquired, trait, so that because a homosexual was *born* with that status (“condition,” per **A** people), and has not *chosen* it, s/he ought not to be penalized in any way—and should, in fact, be treated as well as anyone who is a heterosexual. And given that homosexuals are, by definition, attracted to others of the same sex, they should have the same right to marry as heterosexuals. Although **B** people may frown upon the use of abortion as a birth control method, they tend not to perceive the fetus as a true human being; they are therefore willing to leave abortion decisions to pregnant women and their spouses (or the fathering individual).

The figure to the right illustrates the overlap that exists between **A** and **B** people: They are similar in that they



both regard (many of) the Bible's injunctions as authoritative, and may even agree on certain specific injunctions. But they disagree on other injunctions, tend to perceive the Bible itself differently (book of history *vs.* a collection of literary works), and may differ in views as to *why* a given injunction should be accepted

My reason for focusing on Biblical *injunctions* in this essay is that (some of) these injunctions have continuing relevance for today.[2] Not *all* of them, of course, for many of the injunctions in the Bible [3]—both positive and negative—pertain specifically to a way of life that is long gone, and therefore have no relevance whatsoever for today. However, (many of) the injunctions that refer to how one should relate to other people have a timeless quality, and it is especially such injunctions that continue to have relevance for us moderns.

The notable feature of such injunctions is that they refer primarily to those members of the society whose needs (*physical* in particular) are not being met well and who, therefore, are having difficulty surviving. The Biblical explanation offered for this situation is a very “[un-American](#)” one, in that rather than being of a “blame the victim” variety, it is a “blame the circumstances” sort of explanation. The injunction issued, then, is that one who is *not* in that situation is obligated provide assistance to those who are.

In a sense, such an injunction should be *unnecessary*, given that no *normal* person gains pleasure in observing others in pain or distress, and without “thinking twice” will do what one can to lessen the other's pain or distress. But life in a “civilized” society does *not* conduce behavior that accords with one's nature as a human being, thereby creating the need for explicit injunctions directed at “haves” to attend to the needs of the less fortunate members of their society—with the hope that those injunctions will be followed. Thus, some sensitive members of early Hebrew society, perceiving neediness in their midst, developed injunctions directed at the society's “haves”—but attributed them to God (rather than themselves) to give them “force.” The irony here, of course, is that this involved an admission, on their part, that God herself was powerless to provide such assistance![4]

The “Hebrew” portion of the Bible (i.e., what Christians refer to as the “Old Testament”) can be thought of as consisting of five *genres* of literature—Laws, (pseudo-) history, prophetic (i.e., “preaching”) works, poetry/songs, and wisdom sayings/proverbs—and injunctions of the sort of interest here are present in all five of these *genres*—but especially in the Laws portion, obviously. Let me next, then, briefly illustrate this point.

- In a “Law” book, [Leviticus 23:22](#), we find this: “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God.” This is the law of [gleaning](#), and represents a way helping others that is of an *indirect* nature.

- In a “history” book, [Exodus 22](#), there are these verses: :²²“Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. ²³If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. ²⁴My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.” Unfortunately, God is depicted in a rather unfavorable light in this passage!
- Here is a famous passage from one of the “prophetic” books, [Micah 6](#): ⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ⁸He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.
- “The book with the most poverty and justice references in the Old Testament is Psalms, with 247 verses,” according to [this work](#). Here is an example of an *implicit* injunction from [Psalm 10](#): ²“In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. ³He boasts about the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the LORD.
- An example from [Proverbs 28:27](#) is this: “Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses.”

I should add that there is an extensive literature on the subject at hand (see [this](#), for example), but reviewing that literature is beyond the scope of the present essay—which has as its purpose offering some ideas for updating the aforementioned Biblical Tradition. This may seem like a presumptuous task for one to set before oneself, but I would remind the reader that the Jesus presented in the gospels did precisely that—with the following being some examples:

- In the beautiful story told in [John 8:1 – 11](#), a woman caught in the act of adultery is brought to Jesus, and informed that the Law of Moses stated that she should be stoned to death for her “crime.” Jesus was then asked for his opinion on the matter, and after several moments of reflection said, ““Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”” Jesus then stooped down to continue “writing” so that those who brought the woman to him could think about Jesus’s statement in the light of *their* insistence that the Law ordered her to be stoned. “At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.” In this brilliant story—for that’s *all* that it is—Jesus in effect rejects the Law that ordered stoning in certain situations in favor of [another “Old Testament” law](#)—that one should love one’s neighbor.

- In the famous [Good Samaritan parable](#) Jesus in effect defines “neighbor” as *anyone* in need of help. Not just members of one’s own group. (However, this parable might be regarded as “merely” a restatement of, e.g., [Leviticus 19:33 – 34](#):³³“When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them.”³⁴The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”)
- In [Matthew 25:35 - 36](#) we find this: “³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” What’s notable about this passage is that it not only gives implicit “commands” relative to addressing the physical needs of others (for food, drink, and clothing), but also the need for the sick to receive care (given their inability to provide care for themselves as a result of their sickness), and the need for simple contact with others by those who are strangers (to be made *no longer* “strangers” by one’s friendly interaction with them) and those who are incarcerated.

I suppose that some updating of the Tradition has occurred since Jesus’s time (e.g., Paul of Tarsus made some important *intellectual* contributions—not discussed here, however), but while attending a concert recently (November 17, 2012) I had to wonder about this. The concert (having “Transformation” as its theme) was by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, and was held in the [St. Josaphat Basilica](#) in Milwaukee. Although that building is not exactly colossal, while at the concert it occurred to me that this basilica symbolizes Christianity, in that Christianity has been a colossal failure over the centuries—in promoting and furthering Biblical values. It’s true that there are many *individuals*—I know some—who strive to live by Biblical values, but the *religion* itself has not been very successful in this regard.

Although Jesus (in the Matthew story at least) expanded the definition of “neediness,” and thereby updated the Tradition of which he was a part, a more “radical”—in the sense of *fundamental*—updating is needed than is offered at any point in the Bible. Ironically, using Biblical reasoning as our basis, we can arrive at this more “radical” updating—at least in an *intellectual* sense. But arriving at this *intellectual* updating is not enough, for unless it is *acted upon* it is worthless. But let me present this intellectual updating *anyway*—in the hope that it *will* be acted upon.

What follows is an argument that uses Biblical conclusions as its starting point:

1. The existence of needy people in a society implies the contemporaneous existence of *non-needy* people.

2. Needy people exist in a society because of activities (some of an explicitly exploitative nature) by non-needy people (the Bible's basic position).
3. Because of this latter fact, the society's non-needy people not only have the means, but the obligation, to address the needs of the needy (the basis for many of the injunctions that one finds in the Bible).
4. However, the introduction of injunctions has not solved the problem of neediness—has not resulted in a fulfillment of the promise that "[there shall be no poor among you](#)."
5. The reason for this is that one's attitudes tend to be strongly influenced by one's position in a society, with "haves" [tending to be more selfish](#) than those occupying "lower" positions in a society.
6. What this failure (of introducing injunctions in an effort to solve the poverty problem) reflects is an improper diagnosis of why neediness exists.
7. A *proper* diagnosis would conclude that neediness occurs in societies with social class (or caste) systems.
8. A class system is not just an intellectual abstraction but is a *real* thing. Those "possessed" by *reductionistic* thinking may be unable to comprehend this point, but it *is* a fact.
9. Class systems produce a number of [pathologies](#) [5]—a number of different [problems](#), in fact, poverty being just one of them.
10. Given this fact it is foolish to believe that any of those pathologies can be "cured" by creating a set of injunctions directed at the society's "haves."
11. It should be obvious that the only solution to those problems is *societal system change* (of the *right sort*, of course).

Note here that because the Bible insists that poverty should not exist, and that the only solution to the problem of poverty is societal system change (of the right sort), *implicitly* the Bible supports efforts for bringing about societal system change. Whether or not one would regard such efforts as "religious" (*I do!*) is another matter.

"Societal system change": That sounds not only like a "far out" idea, but a "tall order." I will argue here (briefly) however, that societal system change is not only *not* a "far out" idea (in 1984

I published a [strategy](#) for bringing about societal system change [6]) but a virtually *necessary* idea to consider seriously today.

What I would first point out is that the *idea* of societal system change has been an important part of Western history for centuries. See, e.g., [Utopian Thought in the Western World](#)

Second, over the centuries there have been numerous attempts to *act* on such ideas. See, e.g., [America's Communal Utopias](#) and [Voyages to Utopia](#). The ideas of [Charles Fourier](#) in particular (see, e.g., [Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World](#)) have been acted upon, the settlement of Ceresco by present-day Ripon, Wisconsin, being one example (see, e.g., [Ceresco. History of a Famous Social Experiment](#)). There is a vast literature both on utopian ideas and on actual “experiments,” and the above represents just a small sampling of that literature.

As to why it is virtually *necessary* to think about societal system change today, two facts should be clear about our current situation:

- We are faced with the problem of “global warming.” Prof. [Kevin Anderson](#) (an advisor to the British government on climate matters) has, for example, stated that we humans are on course for a 4° C. increase (since the baseline 1750 CE—i.e., the beginning of the Industrial Revolution) of the global mean temperature by 2060 CE, and that if *that* occurs (which seems highly likely!), most of the world’s population [will be culled](#) (Anderson has stated that it could be 90%!). Prof. Anderson is not alone in believing that global warming will be presenting serious problems for our species.
- Governments are unlikely to address this problem in any meaningful manner.

What the above facts suggest is that if people are to have any hope of surviving, they will need to act as private individuals or as agents of private organizations. In doing so they will need to:

- Locate to a “safe” location from a global warming standpoint (unless they already are living at such a location). “Safe” here refers not just to global warming *per se*, but to the fact that as societies begin to collapse as a result of the “progress” of global warming, many desperate people will be looking for food. One should try to provide as much help to such people as one can, of course, but must give primary consideration to the members of one’s own family—so that one may not be *able* to help all those who *need* help and one would *like* to help.
- Become as self-sufficient at that location as possible. Why? Because as the society (including its economy) begins to collapse, food will become scarce—and unless one produces one’s own food, one is likely to die of starvation.

These goals can be achieved—insofar as they *can* be, that is!—by following one of two options:

- Becoming a [homesteader](#).
- Moving to an existing small community (such as a “[Transition Town](#)”) that is striving for self-sufficiency (i.e., an “[intentional community](#)”), or joining with others to create a new one(s). This is the preferred option if we are to maintain any semblance of civilized existence.

There are no guarantees that by following one of those options one (and one’s progeny) will survive. But *unless* one takes one of those two options one’s chances of survival will be very small.

One way that Christians have perceived the Bible is as the source of knowledge for one’s own “salvation”—referring to the salvation of one’s “soul.” My discussion of “design specifications” (see endnote 6) and of the [New Word Fellowship](#) indicate that I have not abandoned an interest in that matter (I should note, though, that I equate “soul” with “spirit.” [7]) However, it is now time for us to add, to our interest in the salvation of *souls*, an interest in saving our *species*! If one believes that God created our species, how can one *not* believe that we should do everything in our power to *save* it?!! [8]

Endnotes

1. One important claim in the Bible is that the ancient Hebrews had been slaves in Egypt (the basis for the observation of Passover). Here is a statement regarding this matter from a leading Israeli publication ([Haaratz](#), March 26, 2012, article authored by a Josh Mintz):

there is no evidence whatsoever that the Jews were ever enslaved in Egypt. Yes, there's the story contained within the bible itself, but that's not a remotely historically admissible source. I'm talking about real proof; archeological evidence, state records and primary sources. Of these, nothing exists.

It is hard to believe that 600,000 families (which would mean about two million people) crossed the entire Sinai without leaving one shard of pottery (the archeologist's best friend) with Hebrew writing on it. It is remarkable that Egyptian records make no mention of the sudden migration of what would have been nearly a quarter of their population, nor has any evidence been found for any of the expected effects of such an exodus; such as economic downturn or labor shortages. Furthermore, there is no evidence in Israel that shows a sudden influx of people from another culture at that time. No rapid departure from traditional pottery has been seen, no record or story of a surge in population.

2. The Bible *lacks* relevance from historical, scientific, etc., standpoints. However, it continues to have *literary* relevance.

3. So far in referring to the “Bible” I have been alluding specifically to what Christians refer to as the “Old Testament” portion of the Bible. Shortly, I will make brief reference to the “New Testament” gospels.
4. One of the peculiarities of the Bible is that at times God is portrayed as a powerless Being, at other times as all-powerful!
5. The Wilkinson book referenced here has been [challenged](#). Given that I have not read the challenging book (and likely never will!), I cannot comment on it. From reviews that I have read of the book (on the Amazon web site), I have no desire to read the book.
6. Also, in my [eBook](#) (Chapters 2 – 4) I discuss the concept of “design specifications,” and suggest that they should be used as the criteria for designing a New Society—rather than (or perhaps in addition to) such Biblical concepts as ending poverty.
7. What I mean here is that people consist not only of physical matter but an intangible something that is reflected in their “personality.” This intangible something is, for me, even more “real” than the physical part of a person—and is what I would call their “spirit.”
8. As I am writing these words (on November 21, 2012), Israel is continuing its [genocide](#) of the Palestinian people—with the full support of the United States government. (Also see [this](#) and [this](#)—among the many other articles that have appeared on the “net” the past few days.) It occurs to me that perhaps the only way to stop “my” government from contributing to these heinous actions is to “starve the beast.” That is, the adaptive efforts that I have been advocating here would involve creating a way of life far less materialistic than what exists now, and because those involved in it would be paying little or no income taxes, they would not be supporting the various evils being committed by “our” government, including its support for the existing (fascist) Israeli government. With a growing “movement” in this direction, combined with the imminent collapse of the Larger Society because of the ravages of global warming, at some point “our” government will be forced to cease its evil policies—and the sooner, the better!!

The Potsdam Institute's New Report

Alton C. Thompson

A little over four months ago Bill McKibben's important "[Global Warming's Terrible New Math](#)" was published—and now we have Chris Hedges's "[Stand Still for the Apocalypse](#)." Both articles "merely" summarize the findings of climate scientists—Hedges's column summarizing [Turn Down the Heat: Why a 4° C Warmer World Must Be Avoided](#) (prepared, for the World Bank, by the [Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research](#) in Germany). But summaries of technical information are of real value, for they help publicize important information, doing so in a manner easily comprehensible to the average person.

Hedges gives the impression that a fundamental assumption of the Potsdam Institute's report is that continuing the *status quo* will mean a 4° C. rise in the global mean by 2100 CE—the tacitly assumed baseline here being 1750 CE (roughly when the Industrial Revolution began). I should note, however, that on p. 14 of the Potsdam Institute's report we find this: "Even with the current mitigation commitments and pledges fully implemented, there is roughly a 20 percent likelihood of exceeding 4°C by 2100. If they are not met, a warming of 4°C could occur as early as the 2060s." Thus, the *actual* position taken in the Report seems to be that under a "best case" scenario, a 4°C rise is likely to occur by 2100, but that we are on course for such an increase as early as 2060.

Another way of expressing the changes that *are* occurring, and are *likely*, is that in 1750 the concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere was about 278 parts per million (ppm), in September of 2012 it was 391, by 2060 it is likely to be around 550, and by 2100 higher still. As the "[tipping point](#)" for climate change is widely held to be 350 ppm, the fact that we are already *beyond* that level of concentration means that an *acceleration* of change is to be expected.

What such change *means* is difficult to grasp, but the authors of the report remind us that a 4° C. *increase* in the global mean might usefully be compared to the last ice age—during which the global mean temperature is believed to have been 4.5° C. or more *colder* than what it is now: Just as the world of the last ice age was very different from the world of today, so will the world be very different from today when the global mean *increases* by 4° C. In the one case there was excessive *cold*, and in the other there will be excessive *heat*. But what makes these opposite cases comparable, nonetheless, is that they both represent *inhospitability* so far as human (and other) life is concerned.

“Inhospitable” is, however, too innocuous a term to use in referring to the world of 2100, for some drastic changes will be occurring between now and then—among them:

- Crop yields will continue to decline, as will the ability of the oceans to produce food (fish, lobsters, crabs, etc.). As a consequence, hunger and disease and starvation will increase.
- Heat waves, droughts, and floods will increase in frequency and severity, causing not only property damage but loss of life, both directly and indirectly.
- Monstrous storms will become more common, affecting biodiversity adversely, causing tremendous property damage, and wiping out communities of varying sizes.
- More and more plant and animal species will become extinct.
- Sea levels will rise, especially in equatorial regions, forcing people to move inland—and in the case of some island dwellers, to abandon their islands entirely.
- Coral reefs will begin to dissolve.
- Many will develop psychological problems in response to the changes that are occurring.
- Conflict and violence will become more common.
- There is likely to be (in the words of Hedges) “economic, social and political breakdown.”

Although the Potsdam Institute’s report is a useful one in that it rings an alarm bell that is needed at present, and comes from a highly-reputable source, I have several problems with the report (as summarized by Hedges):

- As I have noted in previous essays, Prof. [Kevin Anderson](#) (an advisor to the British government on climate matters) has stated that we are on course for a 4° C. increase in the global mean temperature by 2060—and in that respect is in perfect agreement with the Potsdam Report. Anderson adds, however, that with that sort of increase, it’s likely that 90% of the world’s population will be culled by the various phenomena associated with global warming. What Anderson thereby makes clear, then, is that “climate change” is an extremely serious matter—a point that does not come across clearly enough in the Potsdam Report.
- The Institute’s report is apparently directed at world leaders in government and business, which raises the question: Given that our leaders have not addressed this problem in any

meaningful way to date, why expect them to suddenly change now?! (That's a rhetorical question, by the way!)

- Even if our leaders *were* suddenly to “wake up” and begin acting to address the issue, it's likely that their efforts would be aimed *not* at reducing energy consumption but, rather, at switching to “safe” sources of energy. Such a move would, however, be resisted by existing fossil fuel producers—so that it would be impossible to accomplish a switchover quickly. Instead, the process would be a long one, and in the meantime global warming would continue apace—and cause ever more damage.
- The report doesn't seem to give sufficient attention to the fact that even if a switchover to “safe” energy sources were accomplished “overnight,” the effect of the “excess” carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would continue—and in itself likely result in a further increase of 0.8° C. in the global mean temperature.

Hedges quotes the report to say that: “There is . . . no certainty that adaptation to a 4° C world is possible.” I'm not sure what the authors of the report mean by “adaptation”—and Hedges does not clarify the meaning they are giving the word. I suspect, however, that by “adaptation” they mean switching to “safe” energy sources. Assuming that *that* is what they mean, I have this question: If, in fact, the “tipping point” has been reached and passed, and that this means that change will occur at an accelerating rate, how will the problem of global warming be “fixed” by a switchover to “safe” energy sources—especially given that such a change likely would be a slow process?

Is not the admission that the tipping point has been passed an admission that the “progress” of global warming cannot now be halted? And if *that's* the case, is it not foolish—dangerous, in fact—to assume that there is a “green” solution to this problem? “Foolish” because such an approach will not solve the problem; and “dangerous” because in not solving the problem, it wastes time and resources, and diverts attention from a solution that *would* be relatively better: It amounts to “[fiddling while Rome burns](#),” in my opinion.

I say “relatively” for the simple reason that I don't see *any* solution to this problem that will “save” more than a few people. For the only (somewhat of a) solution that I see is that of drastically changing our *way of life*. As I have added in previous essays, this would be best accomplished by initiating a communitarian movement; and given that such a movement is unlikely to be initiated by either governmental or business leaders, if it is to be initiated at all, it will need to be initiated by private individuals and/or private organizations. (In fact, for an interesting argument relative to this matter, see [this](#).)

The prospects for this occurring are, however, rather dim, I believe. I dislike reaching such a conclusion, but what other conclusion can one honestly make?!

Reports such as that by the Potsdam Institute are useful in that they alert us to a serious problem, and “spell out” the various facets of that problem. However, in failing to address adequately the range of *alternative courses of action* that we have, they “shortchange” us—and may even induce in many a state of paralysis that prevents them from not only *thinking* clearly about solutions, but from *acting* on solutions that might have some degree of salvific value.

The *Malaise* of Civilized Life

Alton C. Thompson

Living (as an inmate, one might add!) in a “civilized” society—a modern one, such as the United States, in particular—is *tough*; for not only is it true that “our society was not designed for people” ([Philip E. Slater](#), [The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point](#), 1970, p. 92), but the same is true of *all* “civilized” societies, not just *ours* (although ours is probably the most deviant “civilized” society, from a “design” standpoint).

As I argue in my [eBook](#) (Chapters 2 – 4), prior to the Agricultural Revolution of 10,000 years ago, a co-development occurred between humans as biological entities and their (gatherer-hunter) way of life, so that the way that humans developed biologically *reflected* that way of life—humans became, in effect, “designed” for that way of life. (Also see the late Paul Shepard’s, [Coming Home to the Pleistocene](#), 1998.)

With the Agricultural Revolution, however, ways of life began to change (especially after 1750 CE)—but our biology remained basically as it had been. Therefore, there occurred a growing “discrepancy” between the (a) way of life for which we had become “designed” and the (b) way of life that we actually led (were *forced* to lead, in most cases). This Discrepancy became, then, a causal factor, in various ways, contributing to:

- Physical and mental illness (see, e.g., Noel T. Boaz, [Evolving Health: The Origins of Illness and How the Modern World is Making Us Sick](#), 2002).
- Feelings of stress, and frustration—which can hinder one’s coping ability by in effect paralyzing one, thereby inhibiting one’s ability to act on one’s own behalf.
- Various *compensatory* behaviors, such as overeating, doing drugs, engaging in aggressive/violent behavior, developing obsessions (e.g., with competitive sports), etc. See, e.g., Donald G. McKinley, [Social Class and Family Life](#), 1964, especially Chapter 3 (“The Ethos of Industrial America”), in which McKinley discusses how the *ideational* developments that have occurred in this country over the years—in response to the Discrepancy, one might argue—have affected people’s behavior. (I prefer the term “substitutionary” to “compensatory,” because the activities involved never are perfect substitutes for the motivations behind them.)
- Feelings of lacking *potency* (a concept associated especially with [Rollo May](#))—i.e., feeling that one has little control over one’s life, feeling that one is simply being pushed along by external forces over which one has no control.

- An emphasis on competition, which leads to feelings of superiority by some, inferiority by others—which feelings tend to poison interpersonal relationships, thereby giving people a pervasive sense of aloneness, isolation.
- Feeling *incompetent*—because of changes that are occurring constantly (especially with technology), such that one has difficulty keeping abreast of those changes.
- Feeling *pressured*—to consume, to be like everyone else in what one does, how one lives, etc.
- Feeling *exploited*—because the amount that one is paid is insufficient for a “decent” living, because one is forced to pay taxes for a bloated military which supposedly “protects our freedoms” but in actuality is, and has been a [monstrous bully](#) for a long period, a monstrous bully on the world stage, etc. (Also see General Smedley Butler’s [War is a Racket.](#))

For these reasons and more (make your own additions to the list!) life in a “civilized” society such as the United States is *tough*. But that’s not the half of it. For **if we peer into the future, we come to realize that life in a “civilized” society is impossible—in its present form, at least.**

The “mindless and unremitting productivity of the larger [economic] system” (Slater’s *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, p. 91) results in the production of a wide array of products—a fact of which we are reminded especially during the Christmas season, during which materialism is at its peak! On the one hand, this bundle of goods represents employment for those involved in the production process (and huge profits for executives and owners); but, on the other hand, these products represent a serious *problem*.

Why, you ask? Because the production of these “goods” likely involved the burning of fossil fuels directly or indirectly, and that burning involved the introduction of “new” carbon—in the form of carbon dioxide (CO₂)—atmosphere. By “new” I don’t mean “newly created,” of course; rather, what I mean is that carbon that had been safely “locked away” below the earth’s surface has been transferred to the atmosphere—thereby increasing the atmosphere’s “greenhouse gas” content.

Why is *that* a problem? As the Potsdam Institute’s recent [Turn Down the Heat: Why a 4° C Warmer World Must Be Avoided](#) notes, during human history down to about 1750 the concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere had been about 278 parts per million. [James Lovelock](#)—originator of the [Gaia hypothesis](#)—has argued that the reason for this long-

term stability is that Earth is similar to a living entity in being a *system*—i.e., an entity equipped with [negative feedback](#) mechanisms which “fight” to maintain relative stability. If external factors impinge on a system, the system will “work” to repair any damage done by those factors. But any system is limited in its ability to cope with “insults,” and in this respect Earth is no different in this respect.

Adding carbon to the atmosphere represents such an insult. Earth’s initial reaction to such an insult is to attempt to *accommodate* it—in, e.g., “carbon sinks” such as forests. But if a given insult is not a *temporary* one—such as a large meteor striking Earth—but, rather, is a *continuous* one—as has been the case with our pouring greenhouse gases into the atmosphere—a point will be reached where the system can no longer cope. When that happens—in this case, when a climatic “[tipping point](#)” is reached—the negative feedback mechanisms that *had* been “working” to maintain relative stability give way to *positive* feedback mechanisms—which *hasten* change.

Earth *had*, in a very real sense, become “designed” for a CO₂ content of about 278 parts per million (ppm), but in September of 2012 it was 391—and is still increasing, of course. We really have no way of knowing (until after the fact!) what the “tipping point” is regarding ppm of CO₂, but as many scientists believe that it is 350 ppm, the fact that it is now 391 ppm means that we have quite possibly reached, and passed, the tipping point. What *that* means is that we are quite possibly now living in a period when future increases in the Earth’s global mean temperature will be *inevitable*—meaning that there is now *nothing that we can do* to prevent future increases in the global mean temperature (and the various phenomena associated with that increase—such as more storminess).

James Lovelock in his recent [The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning](#) (2009) devotes his Chapter 5 to “Geoengineering,” but reluctantly concludes (p. 157): “Whatever we do as geoengineers is unlikely to stop dangerous climate change or prevent death on a scale that makes all previous wars, famines, and disasters small” Prof. [Kevin Anderson](#), an advisor to the British government on climate matters, would add that there is likely to be a 4° C. increase (since the baseline of 1750 CE) in the global mean by 2060 CE—by which time **global warming will have culled 90% of the world’s population!**

Which projection means, folks, that global warming is a serious matter indeed!!

If recent Hurricane Sandy has had any positive benefits, surely one of them has been to force the media to take notice of “climate change.” Although 50 years ago [Barry Commoner](#)—who died on September 30, 2012—began trying to warn the public about the threat posed by global warming, the media gave little attention to his words—or to global warming—then, and continued that deficiency until just recently. As one watches television and listens to people converse, one gains the impression that global warming is still “under the radar” for most, but at

least the media have begun giving *some* attention to the subject—so that today few can claim to be ignorant on the subject.

There are, of course, “deniers” in our midst, but I suspect that even such people know, “in their bones,” that global warming is something real, and is a growing problem. But whether or not that is the case, we moderns who *do* admit that global warming is a problem, have frustrations to *add* to those that come from simply *living*, day to day, in a “civilized” society:

- We see the energy companies continuing to “push” fossil fuels—arguing that their firms are striving for “energy independence,” and—by the way—are also important employers in the economy (the latter claim having its appeal in the fact of the high rate of unemployment that has been characterizing our society recently).
- We observe that governments are doing little to address this problem—with the United States government being the worst offender on this matter, both at home and on the international stage.
- We feel helpless as *individuals* to do anything about this problem; we worry about the world that our children and grandchildren will be living in, but are at a loss as to what to *do* to ensure that they will *have* a future (one *worth* having, especially).

Each of these three factors is likely to make one feel frustrated—and the unfortunate aspect of this frustration is that it is likely to result in intellectual and behavioral paralysis and/or negative compensatory behaviors (such as excessive drinking), rather than any activities of a *positive* nature.

I feel as much frustration as anyone, but have come to some conclusions as to “what to do about it” (as many of my recent essays on this web site indicate). It has become clear to me, first, that “green” efforts are now pointless, because it’s likely that we either have, or soon will, reach, and cross, the “tipping point”—i.e., the point beyond which we can do nothing to halt further change.

Given this conclusion, and the facts that the energy companies and governments are doing so little to address this problem, it is clear to me, second, that if we are to have any chance of being “saved” from the decimation that global warming will undoubtedly cause, we must act as *individuals*—acting either as individuals or as members of groups that we form.

This latter (especially in the form of small communities [1]) is the preferable option, because if there is to be any hope that whatever good in “civilized” society will be retained, what will be needed is to work at creating a New Society within the Existing Order—one having as its basic

“building block” the small, cooperative, (largely) self-sufficient community. (I am referring here specifically to the United States; other approaches may be more relevant in other countries.)

Accomplishing this will, however, be difficult, one reason being that currently-held attitudes will need to give way to new ones for this New Society to “work”:

- The idea that an economy must consist of employers and employees.
- The dogma that private property is sacrosanct.
- The notion that the nuclear family is “natural,” and therefore must be retained in the New Society.

Put another way, however: **Those willing to abandon such ideas and become part of a New Society vanguard will have the best chance of surviving the challenges that global warming will be putting before us.**

A *successful* New Society will *only* be created by those who are not only willing to abandon such ideas, along with the idea that well-being comes primarily from *consuming*. The “pioneers” of the New Society must recognize, on the one hand, that well-being comes from having harmonious relationships with others and pursuing goals that one deems worthwhile; but must also recognize, on the other hand, that in creating this New Society, it must be designed to withstand the ravages that global warming is likely to inflict on our Earth. (This means, e.g., locating away from oceanic locations, and creating communities that are as self-sufficient as possible—especially in food production.)

The creation of a New Society will require (a) the emergence of leadership and (b) the coming forward of people with financial resources who are willing to use those resources for doing something important (for a change!)—helping in the “salvation” of our species.

Whether these “events” occur remains to be seen, of course. *If* they don’t, Prof. Anderson’s projection of a severe culling of the world’s population by 2060 is likely to become a reality. Let us hope that that does not occur!

Endnote

1. Relative to this, Slater (*op. cit.*, p. 142) has referred to “establishing communities in which (a) children are not socialized exclusively by their parents, (b) parents have lives of their own and do not live vicariously through their children, hence (c) life is lived for the present, not the future, and hence (d) middle-aged and elderly people participate in the community in the same

way as youth and vice versa. This constellation of traits forms a coherent unit, as does its opposite.”

Slater added (p. 143) that “Older adults have a vested interest in finding a place for themselves in the new society, and whatever place they find will provide a model for new-culture adherents as they age.”

This latter statement had a decided impact on my thinking when, in 1984, I developed, and had published, a 5-“wave” scenario (or strategy, if you will) of (or for) societal system change, [Ecotopia: A 'Gerendipitous' Scenario](#). It was ironic of me to give the *elderly* (the retired specifically) a vanguard role in my scenario/strategy in light of the emphasis on youth in [Charles Reich's 1970 The Greening of America](#)—an influential “paean to the [1960s counterculture](#) and youth movement . . .” (By “influential” here I mean that Reich’s book gained far more publicity in the 1970s than did Slater’s.)

The Blasphemy of Christmas

Alton C. Thompson

[Christmas](#)—as the word itself implies—is a holiday associated with Christianity. Given that fact, why assert that the celebration of Christmas is *blasphemous*? Two reasons, basically: It has become a *secular* holiday, primarily; and, even as a *religious* holiday, it in effect mocks the memory of Jesus—and is thereby blasphemous.

This is not to say, of course, that Jesus has much relevance for today—as I have argued in “[The Current Irrelevance of Jesus](#)” and “[Continuing the Tradition . . . by Updating It](#).” But Jesus’s relevance—or lack of such—for today is not the issue addressed in the current essay. The issue, rather, is that the *celebration* of Christmas (in the United States in particular) has many elements that render the holiday basically blasphemous—i.e., offensive to anyone who takes the *teachings* of Jesus (as “reported” in the canonical gospels) seriously.

Given that a judgment of “blasphemy” must have a benchmark, I choose as that benchmark the following passage from [Matthew 25](#), a passage that *in effect* states a number of injunctions, and repeats those injunctions four times (!)—presumably to emphasize the point that they are to be taken seriously:

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

³⁷“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

⁴¹“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Whether these words were actually *spoken* by Jesus is, of course, a matter for historians to decide. But my interest here is not so much in the historicity of these words as that they occur in Christianity’s Holy Book, and for that reason are (or at least *should be*) taken seriously (as injunctions) by those who apply the label “Christian” to themselves.

Songs—both “sacred” and secular—are very much associated with the celebration of the Christmas holiday, thus let me begin my commentary on Christmas by quoting some lines from a few “sacred” songs, and then briefly summarizing their collective “message” and commenting on that “message”:

In “[Joy to the World](#)” we find:

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;

And

He rules the world with truth and grace,

In “[Silent Night](#)” we find:

Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child
Holy Infant so Tender and mild,

And

Christ the Saviour is born!

In “[The First Noel](#)” we find:

Born is the King of Israel.

And:

Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord,
That hath made heaven and earth of nought,
And with his blood mankind has bought.

In “[We Three Kings](#)” there is:

Born a king on Bethlehem's plain,

And:

Glorious now behold Him arise,
King and God and Sacrifice.

What these verses collectively assert, relative to Jesus, is that:

- His mother was a virgin.
- Jesus was (and is) God.
- Jesus was born a king.
- He was also a “saviour.”
- His death constituted a sacrifice.

Whether any of these claims is, or was, “true” is not a matter that I wish to address here. Rather, what I wish to note is that they are all *factual* claims, with the implicit suggestion that to be a “Christian,” one must *accept* these claims as facts. That implied suggestion can, of course, be construed as blasphemous—on the basis of the “benchmark” given above—because the benchmark makes reference (if but implicitly) *only* to what one, as a follower of Jesus, should *do*, with the only *belief* associated with the benchmark being that one should *believe* that the actions enjoined in that benchmark are *examples* of what one should do.

It is a peculiarity of Christianity that its various holidays (i.e., holy days) all make reference to (alleged) *events* in Jesus’s life, with *none* of them making reference to his “ministry”! In doing so, they divert attention *away* from that “ministry”—which in itself is blasphemous.

The reference to Jesus as a “savior” seems to be some sort of combination of two concepts. On the one hand, the fact that Jesus is often [referred to](#) as “Jesus *Christ*” (or Jesus, *the Christ*)—

given that “Christ” is Greek for *Messiah*—suggests that he was the [Messiah](#)—a claim that Jews would (and did) reject, of course. But “[savior](#)” itself has pagan connotations in that it is a term associated more with the [Hellenistic religions](#) than the Judaism of Jesus and his earliest followers. (Likely the term was introduced into Christianity by early diaspora Jewish converts, who were familiar with both Jewish and Hellenistic religious concepts.)

The main point that I would like to make here is that the “message” embodied in references to Jesus as either the Messiah or as a savior is the virtual *reverse* of the message of Matthew 25. For whereas Matthew enjoins one to engage in various activities relative to other humans—“doing for *God*, one might say—the concept of a Messiah or savior has a *supernatural Being* doing for *humans*—the primary “doing” being offering himself as a sacrifice (to atone for our “sins”. Whereas the “message” of the Matthew 25 passage is that if one is “righteous” (i.e., follows the injunctions listed), one will have “eternal life,” the “message” of the Messiah-savior-sacrifice concept is seemingly that one is free to “sin” as often as one wishes, for Jesus’s sacrificial death atoned for any of the sins that one has, or will, commit. Thus, the view of Jesus as Messiah/savior is a blasphemous one.

The Christmas holiday, viewed more broadly (i.e., not just as a sacred holiday), is also blasphemous in that:

- The materialism associated with the gift-giving that is such an important feature of the holiday diverts one’s attention from the injunctions of Matthew 25. The *Biblical* basis for gift-giving is found in [Matthew 2](#), in which magi from “the east” are said to have brought gifts to the infant Jesus. But why should one *emulate* these (fictitious) magi? In the story of the magi, the *purpose* of their excursion to Jesus was to pay homage to Jesus, and modern gift-giving has little to do with that purpose—being, rather, an *obligation* imposed on people, by the business community, to keep the economy humming. Were the gifts being given going to [those in need](#)—and were they *useful* items—modern gift-giving would have some bearing on the Matthew 25 passage. But it tends not to—and is therefore blasphemous.
- Hypocrisy is associated with the season in that composers, song writers, and performers are tempted to “cash in” on the holiday by composing songs for the season and/or recording their versions of old standards and newly-composed songs. Usually, those songs have little to do with the “thrust” of Jesus’s “ministry,” as “reported” in the canonical gospels, and are for that reason alone blasphemous. In addition, however, the fact that composers, songwriters, and performers engage in their activities for reasons of private gain, rather than reasons that have some relationship with the Matthew 25 passage, makes their *activities* blasphemous.

- Insofar as Christmas songs remind one to “be good,” they tend to do so in rather narrow terms—and in the process divert one’s attention from the primary problem faced by us humans today, that of global warming (the materialism referred to above being the primary responsible factor.). The irony here is that if one holds that Jesus’s reason for coming to earth was to “save” us (from a very warm place upon death, presumably), doing so by dying a sacrificial death on a cross (so that *salvation* is a key concept in Christianity), this emphasis on Jesus’s supposed salvific death diverts attention from the phenomena associated with *global warming*—phenomena which *likely* will result in the culling of most of the world’s population, and *certainly* will result in the extinction of many (more) plants and animals.

Why is that ironic? Because those who believe that Jesus “died for our sins” also tend to believe that God created all life. Now given that global warming is a *problem that we humans have brought on ourselves* (via our burning of fossil fuels), we are currently in the process of killing off much of what God (they say) created. This is (from their perspective—if they would realize it!) *sinful*; and efforts (whether intended or not) to divert our attention from how we are affecting (what they claim is) God’s creation (and thereby ourselves as well!) must be regarded as blasphemous.

For many the Christmas season is a joyous one, because family members who are scattered in their residential locations come together, and enjoy one another’s company. For many others, however, the season is very stressful—to the degree that suicides occur.

Can Christmas be reformed? *Should* it be? Were people encouraged, during this season, to take the Matthew 25 passage more seriously than they have been doing, and to go beyond that passage (in, e.g., recognizing the threat posed by global warming), the holiday might be worth keeping. But the prospects of that occurring are close to zero—which itself is a damning commentary on Christianity!

Human History: Progressive or Regressive?

Alton C. Thompson

Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet [1743 – 1794] was a leading [Enlightenment](#) figure, being perhaps best known for his views on human “[progress](#)”:

Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit* (1795) was perhaps the most influential formulation of the idea of progress ever written. It made the [Idea of Progress](#) a central concern of Enlightenment thought. He argued that expanding knowledge in the natural and social sciences would lead to an ever more just world of individual freedom, material affluence, and moral compassion. He argued for three general propositions: that the past revealed an order that could be understood in terms of the progressive development of human capabilities, showing that humanity's ‘present state, and those through which it has passed, are a necessary constitution of the moral composition of humankind’; that the progress of the natural sciences must be followed by progress in the moral and political sciences ‘no less certain, no less secure from political revolutions’; that social evils are the result of ignorance and error rather than an inevitable consequence of human nature.

Condorcet's writings were a key contribution to the French Enlightenment, particularly his work on the Idea of Progress. Condorcet believed that through the use of our senses and communication with others, knowledge could be compared and contrasted as a way of analyzing our systems of belief and understanding. None of Condorcet's writings refer to a belief in a religion or a god who intervenes in human affairs. Condorcet instead frequently had written of his faith in humanity itself and its ability to progress with the help of philosophers such as Aristotle. Through this accumulation and sharing of knowledge he believed it was possible for any man [i.e., person] to comprehend all the known facts of the natural world. The enlightenment of the natural world spurred the desire for enlightenment of the social and political world. Condorcet believed that there was no definition of the perfect human existence and thus believed that " He envisioned man as continually progressing toward a perfectly [utopian](#) society. However, he stressed that for this to be a possibility man [i.e., humans] must unify regardless of race, religion, culture or gender.

As one who was born and raised in Wisconsin, I have a “progressive” heritage—in the sense that the [Progressive Party](#), formed in 1924 (a party that was “agrarian, populist, and midwestern in perspective”), was “a new party created as a vehicle for [Robert M. La Follette, Sr.](#) to run for president in [the 1924 election](#).” ([LaFollette](#), Sr., had been Governor of Wisconsin from 1901 – 1906, and a Senator from Wisconsin from 1906 – 1925. “In 1957, a Senate Committee selected La Follette as one of the five greatest U.S. Senators, along with [Henry Clay](#), [Daniel Webster](#), [John C. Calhoun](#), and [Robert Taft](#). A 1982 survey asking historians to rank the ‘ten greatest

Senators in the nation's history' based on 'accomplishments in office' and 'long range impact on American history,' placed La Follette first, tied with [Henry Clay](#).”)

Although the Progressive Party itself is long gone—with, however, [The Progressive](#) magazine, [founded](#) by LaFollette, Sr., in 1909, still in existence—Condorcet’s claim, made in the late 1800s, that history is a story of continual “progress” is still with us to an important degree. One can, however, ask whether—referring now to the United States specifically—whether there has been progress or its opposite, rather.

One could, for example, argue that from a *political* standpoint there has been progress, given that the original [Bill of Rights](#)—which granted such rights as the non-establishment of religion, freedom of speech and the press, freedom of assembly, the right to a trial by jury, etc.—was later supplemented by various [amendments](#) to the Constitution: Amendment 13 abolished slavery, 15 prohibited the denial of suffrage based on race or color, 17 instituted the direct election of U. S. Senators by popular vote, 19 granted the vote to women, and 26 granted it to all citizens 18 years of age and older. But granting rights “on paper” does not guarantee that people will actually *have* rights—and one can argue that the United States has *always* been governed by an [elite](#), regardless of what rights have been granted “on paper.” (Also see this recent [article](#), with accompanying video of [Bill Moyers](#) speaking.)

One could also argue that, from a *technological* standpoint, there has been “obvious” progress—for are not the automobiles, e.g., manufactured in 2012 far superior to those manufactured in 1912? But [Sigmund Freud](#) is one of those who questioned this notion, and stated famously in his *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) [that](#) “If there had been no railway to conquer distance, my child would never have left town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice.” And as one author ([Jason Paglaigos](#)) has said, in summarizing Freud: “Our inherent sexual and violent drives are repressed by civilization[,] thus making our most basic pleasures almost unattainable. Although civilization does seem to offer some pleasure through the development of technology, according to Freud such technology only causes more problems than it fixes. He describes humans as prosthetic Gods when it comes to technology. Humans can create new machines to solve certain anxieties, but as a result, more are created. In addition to this, technology fails to solve the fundamental anxieties caused by our id.”

(I find it interesting that 16 years earlier [Thorstein Veblen](#), in [The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts](#) (1914), stated (p. 314 and 316) that “invention is the mother of necessity,” and on p. 317, and on p. 315 asserted that “it is at least doubtful if these inventions [the telephone, typewriter, and the automobile] have not wasted more effort and substance than

they have saved,—that they are to be credited with an appreciable net loss.” This suggests that Freud was familiar with Veblen’s writings—but I am not aware of any evidence that Freud had read this book by Veblen, or that the two had had any contact, e.g., through correspondence.)

From the standpoint, third, of “legalized violence” committed during wars, there has been a sort of progress in that our wars have *enriched* many—enabling many to enter the ranks of the elite. But those of us in the “99%” are not impressed with that fact—given that it is our fathers and sons and cousins, etc., who have been the “sacrificial lambs” in these “adventures.” The past century has seen World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and more recently “excursions” in Iraq and Afghanistan, among many other places. Were these all of a *defensive* nature, they would perhaps all have been justified. In too many cases, however, the use of our military has been *offensive*—in both senses of that term. Is it any wonder, then, that the “[Decade of US ‘War on Terror’ Yields More Terrorism](#)”? At any rate, the fact that we have seemingly been continually at war with some other country or group hardly represents progressive historical development, so far as I am concerned.

If one takes a *broad* view of history *per se* (not just focusing on U. S. history), it is difficult to agree with Condorcet that “the progression of the human race would inevitably continue throughout the course of our existence.” For one thing, we moderns (perhaps modern Americans more than others) tend to see historical change through a lens that makes it virtually impossible for us to understand how *others* understand—and *understood*—the world, which lens simultaneously “tells” us that we are at the apex of civilization.

The average American, in being so informed, is likely to deny this about his or her perceptions. But such denial is not only *foolish*, but *dangerous*. Dangerous because if one believes that the course of history is ever upward, one may blind oneself to the dangers that loom ahead, and thereby fail to act soon enough to either prevent disaster—or minimize it, in the event that disaster cannot be avoided.

I am hopeful that at least *some* Americans (and others) change their perspective on history, so that they are not among those who learn too late how foolish they have been—thereby endangering the lives not only of themselves, but their families, including their progeny.

Which raises the question, however: What alternative perspective—what other “theory of history”—should they adopt? Let me suggest two here, the first (discussed rather briefly) having somewhat of a combined sociobiological and psychological basis, but not attributable to any specific person (except myself!). In introducing this first “theory,” it will be useful to begin by quoting the following statement by Paul Shepard (from *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, 1998 p. 34):

Human societies vary greatly in their structure, but the differences, however crucial they seem to us, are variations on the species theme—whose *human traits* are Paleolithic. The health of a society is a measure of its freedom from stress, individual suffering, psychopathology, tyranny, and ecological dysfunction as a result of straying from that basic ancestral form. The greater the degree to which a person or society conforms to our Paleolithic progenitors and their environmental context the healthier she, the, they, and it will be.

(The [Pleistocene](#) occurred from about 2,588,000 years ago to about 11,700 years ago. The Pleistocene was “the first epoch of the [Quaternary Period](#) or sixth epoch of the [Cenozoic Era](#). The end of the Pleistocene corresponds with the end of the [last glacial period](#).” Here in Wisconsin [the](#) “**Wisconsin Glacial Episode**, also called the **Wisconsin glaciation**, was the most recent [major advance](#) of the [North American Laurentide](#) ice sheet. Globally, this advance is known as the [last glacial period](#).” Oddly, the southwestern part of the state escaped glaciation, and is therefore known as the “[Driftless Area](#),” glacial [drift](#) being “the material left behind by retreating continental glaciers.”)

The basic idea implicit in the above Shepard quote is that prior to the Agricultural Revolution (of about 10,000 years ago) a co-development had occurred of humans as biological entities and their (gatherer-hunter) way of life. Put another way, humans had become “designed,” as biological entities, for a certain way of life. With the Agricultural Revolution, however, new ways of life began to develop (such change being especially notable after the Industrial Revolution, which began around 1750 CE)—but human biology remained basically the same as it had been before the Agricultural Revolution.

Beginning with the Agricultural Revolution, then, there began a growing *Discrepancy* between (a) the way of life for which humans had become “designed” and (b) the way of that that they were actually living (*forced* to live, in most cases). What this Discrepancy involved *directly* was that people were now (a) exposed to new environmental stimuli, (b) forced to engage in new behaviors, and (c) forced to use their brains differently than they had before. These changes involved stress and frustration, which became manifest in pathological behaviors.

According to this “theory,” then, (a) *new* behaviors arose that had a pathological basis, and (b) many *existing* behaviors acquired a pathological twist. Therefore, virtually *all* behavior gained a pathological element—so that aggressive behavior, sociological developments, intellectual developments (of a scientific, technological, mathematical, etc.), cultural developments (music, literature, etc.), etc., all occurred in response to this growing Discrepancy.

From this perspective, then, *human history itself* has been a pathological phenomenon!—for it is only proper to use the term “human history” for that period of our presence on earth that began with the Agricultural Revolution. Given that our history has had a pathological basis, what this

“theory” asserts is that our history has been solely a *regression*; it has been a “straying from that basic ancestral form,” as Paul Shepard put it.

The second theory that I will discuss here is one that Eugene Linden presents (but not in a very coherent manner) in his [*Affluence and Discontent: The Anatomy of Consumer Societies*](#), 1979). As the subtitle of Linden’s book indicates, his purpose in this book was to analyze consumer societies, and explain how such societies developed, and he makes the following initial comments (p. ix):

[The presence of discontented people in a society, manifested in countercultural movements, is] a necessary part of a consumer society. [It is] the way a consumer society brings new areas of behavior within its ambit.

The hallmark of the consumer is extreme flexibility. [However, the] tragic irony [of a consumer society is that it] is so well equipped to assimilate change without changing itself that it has lost a critically important faculty of all cultures, that is, to recognize and adapt to true danger. Thus, for all its flexibility, the consumer society is a juggernaut, hurtling toward a confrontation with its own contradictions.

What these statements suggest is that Linden has an interest in consumer societies (ours especially, of course—given that he is a member of it), not from a “merely” academic standpoint, but because he sees such societies as being on a dangerous course. Presumably, his reason for trying to understand *how* such societies came to be is to gain “useful” knowledge—i.e., knowledge that could be used to slow down, if not totally halt, their “hurtling.” It is not surprising, then, that he uses his final chapter for that purpose.

Linden’s starting point, in explaining the rise of consumer societies, is one far in our distant past, as our brain was growing in size. As this occurred, we (p. 67) “deepened our reliance on the intellect [and] we lessened our ability to respond . . . to environmental challenges which, in turn, further focused pressure on the brain as a means of adapting and surviving.”

As brain size increased, so did (p. 70) our propositional/analytical abilities. And the development of those abilities resulted in the development of languages. In the West, when languages began to be expressed in written form, they did so using a very limited alphabet (in contrast to the [ideograms](#) developed by the Chinese), and this fact had important *consequences* for Westerners. The (p. 91) “language of the West permits the description of a world having enduring qualities separate from the act of perception.” This “permitted the West to take a posture toward nature in which technology and science might flourish.” (On the following page he adds that “the development of Western civilization was the product of a linguistic accident.”)

Unfortunately, Linden, for some of his discussion, insisted on *personifying* Reason and Nature, and argued (p. 77) that there is a conflict between *natural* processes and *abstract* ones

(represented by our development of a written language), arguing that Nature “has an interest in environmental harmony” and (p. 78) Nature “did not want us to use it [i.e., the brain] the way we do now.” He added that (p. 80) Nature attempted to use “*religious* controls in an attempt to narrow the field in which reason might meddle.” The problem with such an argument, of course, is that although early religions may have been *compatible* with a gatherer-hunter way of life, and *contributed* to a continuation of such a way of life, it is patently ridiculous to argue that those religions were *created* by Nature.

Linden is, however, “on target” in noting that (p. 84) “[Monotheism](#) [which, he says, was developed by the early Hebrews] effectively decontrolled nature, clearing the way for the identification and exploitation of resources that had previously been protected by the sacred mantle of [animism](#).”

Linden noted that a feature of Christianity, as it developed, was that (p. 101) it featured retribution occurring in a supposed *afterlife*, and that the “temporal distance” between wrongful act and retribution worked “to encourage transgression.” (!) He added (p. 81) that both Judaism and Christianity developed so that both “are utterly toothless as enforcers of good conduct in the earning of one’s living.” (!)

Per Linden (p. 95), it was the Reformation, thought, that “paved the way for . . . [the] final cultural adjustments that preceded consumer behavior.” With Protestantism there developed (p. 102) “a theology in which man’s worldly ambitions were not just tolerated but encouraged”—this indicated by the introduction (p. 103) of the concept of a “calling”—developed by [Martin Luther](#), but perhaps associated even more with [John Calvin](#). (I would add here that the concept of a “calling” developed not only in the *economic* sphere, but the *military* one as well!) The Reformation, then (p. 81) removed “the residual moral constraints on enterprise [that was] in the holy path of Catholicism.”

As a further indication that Christianity, in the form of Protestantism, became a mere tool of the Economy (and even had *political* implications!), Linden notes (p. 104) that the evangelist—who was almost always a Protestant—was “the original model for the salesman or stump politician . . .” I have been associated with Protestantism my whole life (although our son married a wonderful Catholic girl), and I will have to admit that Linden’s comments about Protestantism ring true to me!

What about the future?—a topic dealt with by Linden in his final chapter, Chapter 11 (“The Flight From Certainty,” pp. 171 – 178). Earlier, Linden had stated this (p. 82): “Instead of progress, the history of the West has been a gradual *revision* of the way in which we view and act toward the world.” I’m not sure what he meant in writing this, but assume that he did not intend it to be a complimentary comment on Western history.

In his final chapter, however, he asserted that (p. 174) “We are at a point of change,” and referred to (p. 176) “my slim hopes for survival.” Interestingly, he also stated (p. 176) his opinion that “the only real threat to the American economy is self-sufficiency.” This statement was a partial inspiration for me when, in 1984, I wrote my [Ecotopia: A 'Gerendipitous' Scenario](#), in which I presented a strategy/scenario of societal system change, and in effect argued that one way of changing U. S. society was for those of us who were “hosting” the parasites who were controlling our society would abandon the Existing Order for self-sufficient communities, the Existing Order would eventually collapse. (At that time the global warming issue was not on my mind, which explains the different, if basically similar, though, orientation that I have given this idea in my recent essays.)

The two “theories” discussed above are rather different in that the first argues that human actions have been *driven* (or *pushed*) by pathological motives since the Agricultural Revolution (having their basis in the Discrepancy), human history being the result; and Linden’s theory arguing (except for the physical matter of growing brain size), rather, that *intellectual developments* have *pulled* humans in a certain direction, human history (in its Western form especially) being the result. One could, though, argue that the psychological argument is more basic, in that it was pathological factors that “drove” the intellectual developments emphasized by Linden!—so that *both* theories have merit, with, however, the psychological “theory” being more fundamental.

Whichever theory best explains human history (the two discussed, or some other one), it should be obvious to any thinking person that human history has been a story of *regression*, not *progression*. I would like to *think* that it is possible to get out of this mode (a point that I have been “hammering on” in my previous essays on this site), but I also believe that there is little reason to be very optimistic about this.

Despite that (unpleasant) fact, I intend to continue to write essays in which I express my views, emphasizing the fact that global warming is occurring, and is likely to “wipe out” most members of our species, despite our best efforts. “Best efforts” here does not, however, include efforts to get our political leaders to act or fossil fuel producers to cease their production; what they involve, rather, are efforts that recognize that it is now too late to halt further global warming—so that our only option now is that of engaging in efforts designed to have adaptive value. Even such efforts may not result in the “salvation” of those who engage in them, but that strong possibility should not deter us from at least *trying* to “save” ourselves by engaging in such efforts.

[I wrote the following “proposal” in late October, and have let it “sit” since then. However, today my email contained an [article](#) by Simon Balto (a Ph. D. student at UW-Madison) on James Baldwin, and this motivated me to decide to send my “proposal” in for posting.

In growing up in Wisconsin, I had encountered few blacks, but *had* encountered what we called “Mexicans”—i.e., latinos who had migrated from Mexico to, e.g., Texas, and were in the area during the summer to pick cucumbers. (Waushara County, where I grew up, was an important cucumber-growing area, and for several summers I worked in a pickling plant to earn money for college.)

When it was time for graduate school, I chose the University of North Carolina, and while there a group of us went—out of curiosity—to a Ku Klux Klan meeting near Durham, North Carolina. My roommate at the time was from Charlotte, North Carolina, and he made me proud by arguing with someone there—the result being that he was soon surrounded by klansmen. My roommate—a Southerner!—helped sensitize me to the issue of race, and this has been a concern with me ever since. The following “proposal” reflects that fact.]

“The Last Shall Be First”: A Proposal

Alton C. Thompson

“However, there need be no poor people among you, [1] for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you,”

[Deuteronomy 15:4](#)

“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

[Mark 10:31](#)

Could the Markan statement above be a *prediction*—one whose realization would mean that there would not only not *need* to be “poor people among you,” but would not *in fact* be any? Whether Jesus’s statement, as recorded in Mark (and repeated in [Matthew 20:16](#) and [Luke 13:30](#)), was intended by Jesus to be a *prediction* or, rather, was merely the expression of a *wish*, the fact of the matter is that it is a situation *capable of realization*. Indeed, this is a *propitious moment* in world history for its realization—first in the United States, and then elsewhere. I must qualify this assertion, however, by noting that:

- It is essential that the *process* of realization begin as soon as possible.

- The beginning of that process is dependent *only* on someone with financial resources stepping forward to provide “seed money.”

A further point: *Everyone* will benefit from the initiation of this process—with the qualification, however, that I mean “everyone who is *able to survive*.”

This latter qualification is likely to have a cryptic meaning for most, thus one of my requirements here is to clarify its meaning. I should perhaps add at this point that although the proposal that I offer here might be interpreted as “radical” by many, *my* view is that it is, rather, simply a *common sense* one resulting from reasoning from known facts and likely projections.

As the proposal that I offer is based not just on my value system but on certain premises that I take to be factual, a useful starting point here is to state those premises:

- Prior to the Agricultural Revolution of about 10,000 years ago, humans lived in small non-sedentary [groups](#) that were highly egalitarian. The “division of labor” tended to have a sexual basis in that male adults engaged in hunting and adult females in gathering—evidently because such a “division” seemed to be “natural” to those living then. At any rate, most of a group’s food tended to be supplied by the women, with *none* of the adults, however, spending a significant time engaging in “economic” activities. The evidence available for these early societies (much of it coming from the study of *contemporary* “primitives”) suggests that these societies were relatively peaceful; and although some scholars have [questioned](#) this “fact” about gatherer-hunter peoples, one has reason to suspect that such claims are based more on ideological commitments than on empirical research findings.
- As I state in my [eBook](#) (pp. 40 – 41), “after the Agricultural Revolution there developed an increasing ‘discrepancy’ between the (a) way of life for which humans had become ‘designed’ during the period from c.15,000 years ago to c.10,000 years ago, and the (b) way of life that they were actually living—a way of life that for most was one *imposed* on them. That is, the ‘fit’ that had existed prior to the Agricultural Revolution gradually weakened, that weakening becoming especially pronounced after the Industrial Revolution (which began about 1750 CE).” Prior to the Agricultural Revolution there had been a co-development of humans as biological entities and their way of life—in that the *way* that humans developed biologically was affected by their way of life, and that way of life *itself* was affected by humans’ developing biology.

Just prior to the Agricultural Revolution, then, a “fit” existed between humans as biological entities and their (gatherer-hunter) way of life, which “fit” began to disappear as the Agricultural Revolution “progressed”—and beyond. There resulted a growing “discrepancy” in that whereas human *biology* remained basically unchanged, *way of life* began to change—meaning that a discrepancy was arising between (a) the way of life for which humans had become “designed” and (b) the way of life they actually had.

That fact (of a growing discrepancy) meant that humans were increasingly (a) exposed to *stimuli* for which their bodies had *not* been “designed” (and deprived of those stimuli for which their bodies *were* designed), (b) forced to engage in *behaviors* for which their bodies were *not* designed (and unable to engage in those behaviors for which their bodies *were* designed), and (c) forced to use their brains in ways for which they had *not* been designed (and unable to use their brains in ways for which they *were* designed).

As René Dubos put it many years ago in his [*So Human An Animal*](#) (1968, p. 16):

Modern man [i.e., the modern *human*] is anxious, even during peace and in the midst of economic affluence, because the technological world that constitutes his immediate environment, by separating him from the natural world under which he evolved, fails to satisfy certain of his unchangeable needs. In many respects, modern man is like a wild animal spending its life in a zoo [of the old-fashioned type]; like the animal, he is fed abundantly and protected from inclemencies but deprived of the natural stimuli essential for many functions of his body and his mind. Man is alienated not only from other men, not only from nature, but more importantly from the deepest layers of his fundamental self.

Humans are, of course, highly *adaptable* creatures. However, as René Dubos has noted (in his *So Human an Animal*, 1968, p. 146), “the very fact that man [i.e., the human] readily achieves biological and sociocultural adjustments to so many different kinds of stresses and undesirable conditions is dangerous for his welfare and his future.”

- A high degree of economic [inequality](#) exists in our society, and the degree of inequality is growing.
- Given that humans developed, biologically, in small, relatively egalitarian societies, it can be said that humans are not *designed* for the highly inegalitarian society that currently exists. Put another way, inegalitarian societies are *unnatural*. As such, they are potentially [harmful \(in various ways\)](#) not just to those members at the *bottom* of the society, but to *all* members.

- *Laissez-faire* thinking (see [this](#) and [this](#)) helps reinforce, and justify, the discrepancy that exists, and is therefore an *obstacle* to removing it.
- Given that the aforementioned discrepancy exists because our way of life does not “fit”—i.e., is discrepant with—our biology, that discrepancy can be (safely) removed only by changing our way of life. [2]
- Global warming—also referred to as “climate change”—is the most serious problem facing us humans at present. Prof. [Kevin Anderson](#), an advisor to the British government on climate matters, [believes](#) (see [also](#)) that the “world [is] on a path towards potential 4C rises [in the global mean temperature] as early as 2060, and 6C rises by the end of the century.” Prof. Anderson believes “that only around 10 per cent of the planet's population—around half a billion people—will survive if global temperatures rise by 4C.” What such severe culling implies is that societies—including ours, of course—will be collapsing in a matter of decades. ***THAT’S A SERIOUS MATTER, FOLKS!***

The problems that we face with global warming (a severe culling being the primary one) are *real*, not just *potential*—as the experience of the past few years demonstrate. And although they stem *directly* from our emissions of “greenhouse gases” into the atmosphere (at a rate that “carbon sinks” are not able to handle) as a result of our burning of fossil fuels, I would identify the (aforementioned) *Discrepancy* as the *fundamental* causal factor. I believe that virtually *all* of the problems that we face, and have faced, as humans have their basis in The Discrepancy—including the current—and near-future—global warming problem.

What this conclusion suggests, then, is that our various problems will be solved *only* by removing this Discrepancy; and given that the “variable” in The Discrepancy is “way of life,” it follows that The Discrepancy can be removed only by ***changing our way of life***—in a non-discrepant direction, that is.

For me, this is a logical conclusion from my premises. Others may disagree with this conclusion—and it is their “right and privilege” to do so. They, however, must *live* with this conclusion. I have no interest—or intent—to “convert” others to my conclusion, and the premises upon which it is based. My interest, rather, is to (a) *identify* those others who are in basic agreement with my point of view, (b) suggest a *course of action* to such people, and (c) encourage those who agree with my proposal to somehow *act* on it—if only by supporting it financially (or soliciting such help).

“Changing our way of life” may seem like a “tall order”—one, in fact, that is too tall an order to take seriously. However, my starting point here is the fact that our distant ancestors—as I noted above—lived in small, non-sedentary groups, a living situation that I declared as “natural.” I would add now that the important fact about our ancestors was not that they were *non-sedentary* but, rather, that they lived in small groups—for what I am proposing here is that we perceive “changing our way of life” as a process of creating a series of small (geographically-based) *communities* (so that residents would have a *sedentary* existence), with the initial settlements being (a) very small and (b) simple.

The reason: Any number of decisions would need to be made by the “pioneers” of this process, with a great deal of experimentation occurring; this process would occur most smoothly if engaged in (for any given community) by just a small number of people (with “small” defined as perhaps in the 12 – 25 range). And if this “small” vanguard group consisted just of *retired* people, because the number of *kinds* of decisions would thereby be minimized, the chance for success in making good decisions would be maximized.

Ideally, this process would occur at different locations, and an interchange of ideas would occur between the pioneers at these different locations. As *successful* decisions became more common, an effort could be made to expand community size—both by drawing in more retirees, and people of “productive” age (with their children, if they had any). A “hard and fast” rule should, however, be established that no community should be allowed to grow over a certain size (say 500), because scale *is* important, as [Kirkpatrick Sale](#) has argued.

Scale, although an important factor, is not the *only* important factor, however. A second important factor is that the institutions of the community be designed so that the physical needs of all members would be met—and in a manner such that this would be *automatic*. *How* this principle would be “operationalized” should be determined by any given community’s members, in a manner agreeable to all members (or as many as possible). (I recommend the Structured Interaction Group as the preferred institution for making such decisions—see my eBook, referenced above.) One way of perceiving this objective of “need satisfaction” is to specify that a goal of community members should be to make their community a “family of families”—so that its members feel a certain sense of “closeness.”

Third, and by no means of lesser importance, communities must be designed with the ravages of global warming in mind. On the one hand, this would mean locating a given community at a location likely to be “safe” so far as global warming is concerned (e.g., away from an ocean shore—because of rising sea level). On the other hand, given the strong possibility that our society will be collapsing within a matter of decades, it is essential that the initial communities be created to be as *self-sufficient*, economically, as possible (in food production, especially).

Once the Movement herein referred to reaches a certain “critical mass,” it will be possible for communities to specialize somewhat and develop trade relationships with nearby communities, but until that time it will be wise for any given community to strive for a high degree of economic self-sufficiency.

As to *who* should get involved in the Movement referred to here, I have already identified retirees as the ideal pioneers of the Movement. It is now time to give the title of this essay some “meat” (or not—if you are a vegetarian!). Let me do so in a “personalizing” context.

I was born into a working-class family (my dad was a carpenter who worked with a partner), and spent my early years living in rural/small town south-central Wisconsin. My parents had both been raised in a Norwegian Lutheran church that my ancestors had helped establish, but early in their marriage they concluded that that church was too “dead” for their tastes, and they then (with several other couples) established an Assemblies of God church. I was raised in that church, and later (while in my teens) in a Conservative Baptist church.

My first two years of school were spent at a one-room country school, with three girls and myself constituting the first and second grades. Because we then moved to near the county seat, I spent my next six years at a [Normal school](#)—a 2-year “college” for training teachers, with us students being their “guinea pigs.” My class had two girls and myself as its members—until one of girls moved to a different part of the state. The school was run by two spinster sisters, one who taught music (to all of us), and the other (the Principal) teaching all of the other courses to the student teachers—including the Civics class taught to us eighth graders.

“Miss Vivian” (the music teacher) and “Miss Kellogg” (the Principal) were both wonderful women, the former instilling in students the joy of music, the latter the necessity of recognizing one’s responsibilities, and taking them seriously. Along with my parents, these two wonderful ladies had a profound influence on my development—so that it’s no wonder that I grew to love classical music, and believe strongly that an egalitarian society would not only be *desirable*, but *possible* to achieve. I also owe to those four individuals my conviction that “success” *per se* is not a worthy goal to establish for oneself: One’s intellectual and behavioral orientation should be toward *others*, rather than oneself.

In going to college, and then graduate school, I attended church only if at home. However, while attending graduate school at the University of North Carolina, I met a girl from the southwestern part of Wisconsin, we started dating, and were married several months later—in a United Presbyterian church, which was the denomination in which she had been raised. This occurred in Maryland, from which we moved to Ohio and lived for nine years, and then moved back to Wisconsin in 1976. Initially, we attended a Presbyterian church (whose minister was the son of

my wife's childhood church!), but when that minister died and was replaced, we left that church for a nearby United Methodist church, and remained members of that church for almost 30 years. Because of dissatisfaction with a minister after that period, we returned to the Presbyterian church that we had joined upon returning to Wisconsin, and are members there now.

Although I have been a church member for the 46+ years of my marriage, I can't say that I have found church attendance very satisfying—for two reasons. First, the churches to which I have been exposed have evinced little evidence of taking the “radical” message of the Bible very seriously—getting bogged down, rather, in belief, ritual, and (some limited) charity work. Second, those same churches have shown no interest whatsoever in the problem of global warming. Insofar as their orientation has been to “salvation,” it has been the salvation of *souls*, not *lives*. What this likely reflects, in large part, is that—unlike the prophets of the Hebrew Bible—the leaders are not *engaged* with the society, and ill-informed regarding the dangers posed by global warming.

Yesterday (October 28, 2012), my younger daughter (who is still at home) and I did some traveling in our part of the state (the Milwaukee area)—my wife currently being in Massachusetts to spend some time with our older daughter and her family—and were able to observe some fairly expensive homes in exurbia. This provided a contrast to what I normally see, for I usually take the bus to work, and in doing so not only encounter mainly working-class people, but ride past many homes/apartments that are decidedly less expensive than the ones that I observed on my drive yesterday.

Perceiving disparities such as this (which so often have a racial basis) grate on me—offend my value system. I have long wondered what, if anything, I could do about such disparities, and the development of my current ideas on that matter have great appeal to me; the proposed program is the sort of program for which I could develop a strong and deep commitment. My problem is that I lack the financial resources to initiate the program.

Achieving a relatively egalitarian society may seem “utopian” to most people, but not to me—for two reasons in particular. First, our country has a rich history (see [this](#) and [this](#)) of communal “experiments” (the Shakers, Oneida, New Harmony, Economy, Zoar, etc.). Second, this history is still “[alive and well](#)” to a degree. What is lacking currently, however, is a clear Movement to create a New Society.

I should add that even if a Movement *does* get initiated—and soon—there are no guarantees that it would result in the “salvation” of many—for I believe that it's now too late for any sort of program (including ones involving technological “fixes”) to have much effect. The most that we should expect of a program such as the one that I am proposing here is that it will result in the

“salvation” of a few thousand people—a few hundred thousand at most. Would that make the project worthwhile? Yes, in my opinion—for a program that prevents our species from becoming *extinct* is for that reason alone worthwhile. Not that any program is *guaranteed* to “save” our species; but *trying* to do so is surely a worthwhile goal.

As my title suggests, and given the Biblical “preference for the poor,” my primary interest is in developing a project that would try to attract the “downtrodden” as participants—so many in that category being people of “color.”[3] The *situations* of such people should make participation in the program *relatively* attractive, so that my desire to direct the program at the poor should, on the one hand, satisfy my desire to help the poor while simultaneously being one that would be capable of *attracting* such people. One way of perceiving the program is that it would involve the “host” withdrawing its support from the “parasites” who have been sucking its blood out.

Once a Movement gets underway—if one does!—it is likely to attract middle-class people—for the simple reason that living conditions in the Larger Society are likely to deteriorate significantly within a few years or decades. Insofar as that occurs, more will be saved from the ravages of global warming—and that fact should give us a sense of satisfaction. For the more people who can be so saved, the better.

Endnotes

1. For an enlightening discussion of this phrase, see, e.g., Peter T. Vogt’s “[‘There Shall Be No Poor Among You’](#): Deuteronomy’s Vision and the Christian Church,” 2002.
2. Trying to change our *biology* would be risky business; for that reason, it would be exceedingly foolish to try to do so.
3. For a discussion of the moral depravity of the rich, see Chris Hedges’s recent [essay](#).

Our Head-In-The-Sand Society

Alton C. Thompson

Following are some statements from articles that have appeared recently on the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*'s [online](#) web site:

Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Co. plans to build a new office tower, housing hundreds of employees, at its downtown Milwaukee campus and is seeking \$48 million in city financing for the \$300 million project.

[Barry] Alvarez to return to sideline for Rose Bowl [to coach the Wisconsin Badger football team]

Mary Nelson and a couple thousand supporters are asking Milwaukee County to spend several hundred thousand dollars or more on restoring one page of South Milwaukee's past. The county should dredge several feet of accumulated muck from an old mill pond on Oak Creek to restore recreational opportunities for youth, particularly ice skating, said Nelson, a former alderman.

Gov. **Scott Walker** gave former **Bucyrus International** CEO **Tim Sullivan** the tough task this year of trying to [find a way](#) to get environmentalists and industry types to support a proposed iron ore mine near Lake Superior.

Old Navy, which closed at Southridge Mall this past spring, will return to a new location at Southridge in 2013, mall owner Simon Property Group announced Thursday. Old Navy will open a store with just under 13,000 square feet near Macy's department store.

The state Department of Transportation will hold two informational meetings next week to kick off its planning process for rebuilding Interstate 94 on Milwaukee's west side. Transportation officials are studying how to rebuild the aging 3-mile freeway stretch from 25th St. to 70th St. That includes the Stadium

I suspect that there is nothing particularly unusual about these statements—in that similar statements occur in other major newspapers. And although the statements themselves all have different subject matter, they have an important commonality: They are all head-in-the-sand sorts of statements.

Given the threat—to our very existence as a species!—that we face from global warming, it is hard to fathom why a business-as-usual mentality prevails in our society. But it does.

It has been said (in a summary of Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920) that:

Declaring that "*the aim of life is death*" and "*inanimate things existed before living ones*", Freud interprets an organism's drive to avoid danger only as a way of avoiding a short-circuit to death: the organisms seeks to die in its own way. He thus found his way to his celebrated concept of the [death instinct](#).

Which raises the question: Does the behavior of most people today prove that Freud was right in positing a "death instinct"?

I doubt that there *is* such an instinct—despite the fact that much behavior today is *consistent* with such a ("theoretical") instinct. I believe, rather, that the behavior in question has a simpler explanation: People are used to living in a certain manner, and although they may be aware of the fact that global warming is occurring, they either:

- Don't realize how serious a threat it is—for advertisements by the fossil fuel companies make no mention of it (emphasizing their role in employing people, etc., instead), and the mass media downplay it. (A friend of mine regularly calls me on Tuesdays to inform me of environmental articles in Monday's issue of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and the articles that he mentions to me are invariably short, and buried in the paper, and therefore easy to miss.)
- Have some knowledge of global warming's seriousness, but are convinced that it is a governmental matter that will be properly addressed by government in due time.
- Are thoroughly convinced that global warming represents a serious threat to many species including our own, have serious doubts that government will address the problem until, perhaps, it's too late, realize that they *should* be doing something themselves (beyond being a "green" consumer), but either don't know *what* to do, or have ideas regarding that matter, but are hampered in pursuing them by various factors (such as lacking the money to do what they think they should be doing!).

What is especially disheartening is that important decision-makers in the society—who, one would assume, have a certain degree of intelligence and a fairly high level of education—continue to make "big" plans as if our society 20 or 30 years from now will be little different from the way it is today. Thus, regarding the statements that I quoted at the beginning from the www.jsonline.com web site:

- A major insurance company in Milwaukee is planning to build a new building—one that will grace the Milwaukee skyline for decades to come.

- Old Navy is planning to re-open a store at the Southridge shopping mall (located in the suburb of Greendale)—presumably with the idea that it will be able to operate its store at that location for years.
- The Wisconsin state Department of Transportation wants to replace a stretch of I-94 in the vicinity of the Miller Park Stadium—again under the assumption that people will be living and driving in Milwaukee for many years into the future, so that it is necessary to provide them with a freeway that is in good driving condition.

What these various plans have in common is that all assume that the basic *character* of Milwaukee will remain the same into the distant future. But if British climate scientist (and advisor to the British government) [Kevin Anderson](#) (and the [World Bank](#)) is right that the global mean temperature is likely to increase by 4° C. by 2060 CE, and (per Anderson) global warming will have wiped out 90% of the world's population by that time, how is it possible that the Milwaukee of 2060 will be anything like the Milwaukee of 2012?! Impossible, I would say! Yet these leaders—people who should know better—either aren't *aware* of this projection or simply don't *want* to think very far into the future. Should we then call them “irresponsible,” or is there a more apt appellation?

“Irresponsibility” might perhaps be more accurately applied to the statement that Barry Alvarez—former coach of the Wisconsin Badger football team, and now the university's athletic director—will be coaching the team in the upcoming [Rose Bowl](#) game (because coach Bret Bielema recently resigned, to become head coach at the University of Arkansas). For the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* has been giving this matter a great deal of attention—as if it were far more important than the threat posed by global warming. Of course, the newspaper is pandering to the public in doing so, knowing that the Rose Bowl is of great interest to most of its readers (including me, I must confess!). But why can't the newspaper exercise some *leadership* in informing the public about important matters, why must it be preoccupied with simply *pandering* to the public?

You can provide your own answer to that question—for there are “bigger fish” that especially warrant that label. President Barack O'Bomber—whose list of crimes, legal and otherwise, is [almost endless](#)—is now a “lame duck” president, which fact means that—in being unable, by law, to be re-elected—has the freedom to use his position of power and influence to warn the citizens of this country about global warming, and offer suggestions—to governmental units (such as state and local governments, along with the U. S. Congress), individuals, and private organizations—as to what they might do to address this problem.

Although O'Bomber (for whom I voted, by the way) has made some comments on the matter, his statements and actions to date have been tepid at best. Granted that O'Bomber would meet with

tremendous resistance if he were to be more vocal and active; but being in a “lame duck” position gives him an opportunity to go down in history as the person who became a mighty force in the “salvation” of our species. Unfortunately, however, the odds of this occurring are not *close* to zero, but are simply zero!

As I have stated in a number of previous essays, I don’t think that it is possible to save more than a few humans from the ravages of global warming, but unless appropriate actions are taken soon—and I mean ASAP—*fewer still* will be saved—with the possibility, even, that our species will become extinct. If *that* occurs, many other species—including Nature itself—will all that will benefit.

Why Would We *NOT* Want Our Society to Collapse?!

Alton C. Thompson

When I wrote my “[But is Ruin a Bad Thing](#)” four months ago, I began the essay with a [Clay Bennett](#) cartoon showing a sign with “Romney” on the top, and “Ruin” underneath—the painter having thought that Mitt Romney’s running mate (for the U. S. presidency) was named “Ruin” rather than “(Paul) Ryan.” The basis for the cartoon was that the election of Mitt Romney, in the judgment of Bennett and many others, would spell ruin for the American economy—because of his acceptance of “supply side” economic beliefs.

What cartoonist Bennett failed to understand, in creating that cartoon, is that *both* of the two major political parties in this country—Democratic and Republican—serve the interests of Wall Street and the elite in general. Thus, to expect that either of the candidates for the major parties—Barack Obama for the Democrats, Mitt Romney for the Republicans—would be any sort of “savior” for those of us in the “99%,” was delusional

I stated in my earlier essay:

Although societal collapse is likely to occur regardless of which team is elected in November, it’s likely to occur *sooner* under the Rhombney-Ryan team—and in a manner more *propitious* so far as adaptation is concerned. And *that’s* why I hope that the Rhombney-Ryan team wins the election.

(For my use of Rhombney rather than the “correct” Romney, see [this.](#))

The basis for my asserting that “societal collapse is likely to occur regardless of which team is elected,” was my conviction that the “progress” of global warming would be such that within a few decades societies all over the world would be collapsing, the United States included. This conviction was based on the expectation that the global mean will increase (from the base point of 1750 CE) by 4° C. by 2060 (see p. 14 of the World Bank’s [report](#)), which magnitude of increase by that time is likely to mean a severe culling of the world’s population before 2060. (British scientist [Kevin Anderson](#), an advisor to the British government on climate matters, has stated that it could be as much as 90%!)

Such a severe culling of the world’s population would, of course, be tragic. However, it appears to inevitable—for we have either crossed the “[tipping point](#)” relative to “climate change,” or soon will—and it’s unlikely that we will be able to do anything to prevent that from happening.

Given the (presumed) fact that global warming cannot be halted, we have two choices:

- Accept our fate, and let global warming “take” us (or do the “taking” ourselves).
- Resolve to do what we can to “save” ourselves—i.e., develop plans for *adapting* to the changes that will be inevitably occurring, and then acting on those plans.

As I have commented on this second point in many of my previous essays, I will not do so here—for the point that I wish to develop here is that despite the fact that disaster is undoubtedly in our future:

- If people engage in the right sort of action, they should have a good chance to survive. (I doubt that many will, which is why I would not expect that Anderson’s figure of 90% could be reduced much.)
- The Existing Order is thoroughly rotten, so that even those who pursue the New Society route will likely have a bumpy ride, that ride is likely to be preferable to life in the Existing Order—even as it is *now* (it will *worsen* over time, of course.)

How bad is the Existing Order (in the United States, that is)? Here are a series of statements from a [single recent article](#) (by Bob Urie) that allow me to “rest my case”:

Democrats first joined the effort [to get rid of Social Security] in earnest with Bill Clinton’s [plan to partially privatize Social Security](#). The idea was to let our good friends on Wall Street manage a bit of the money for us, for a fee of course

[Mr. Obama took up the torch of fiscal austerity](#) of his own initiative by [creating his very own deficit commission](#). This should have come as no surprise to anyone paying attention—[Mr. Obama publicly stated his intention to ‘fix’ Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid](#) when he allied himself with the Wall Street friendly ‘Hamilton Project’ in 2006.

For the uninitiated, the Hamilton Project is the demon spawn of the Clintonite contingent of the Democratic Party led by former Treasury Secretary and disgraced Citicorp Board member Robert Rubin. The kindest take on the Wall Street lootocracy populating the organization is that they don’t know how money is created (the U.S. has a fiat currency), making them morons.

if one group of Wall Street politicians bears responsibility for the economic catastrophe that an unregulated Wall Street has visited upon the world in recent years, the Hamilton Project is it. [The ‘too-big-to-fail’ guarantee of the banks](#), which is the only reason why insolvent, predatory Wall Street remains in business, is an entitlement program for connected bankers—for which they pay nothing. [In contrast to Social Security, to which the beneficiaries make regular contributions while employed.]

The bloated, murderous, military industry that lobbies the U.S. into unnecessary wars for their own benefit and that of corporate welfare receiving multi-national corporations is an entitlement program.

as far as entitlement programs go, government guarantees and redistribution schemes are only a starting point. As economist Dean Baker has argued, America's [professional class retains monopoly pricing power for their labor](#) through trade restrictions while the working class has been thrown to the wolves.

corporate executives have entitled themselves to robber-baron sized paychecks through the combination of trade policies that have so reduced the fortunes of the working class, tax abatements that have bled the public weal for some forty years, and through the financialization of the economy that has favored, along with Federal Reserve policies, the financial wealth that executives pay themselves with.

The U.S. pays 30% – 50% more per person than other first world nations for health care that is of substantially lower quality because we have a largely private health care system.

the private health care system in America is the global leader in shifting costs to those with the least social power.

We live in a great country, don't we!! (Not!!)

If I had the time—and if I were to make reference to other articles—I could expand this list immensely. Which is a troubling comment to have to make!

Given this, why would any sane person want this society to continue?! We should, rather, *welcome* the forthcoming demise of this society—but only if we are also willing to begin the work of creating a New Society within the shell of the Existing Order.

As I noted earlier, those who make the latter choice can expect to have a bumpy ride. But that's better than being faced with the prospect of oblivion, isn't it?!

The Blasphemy of Church “Services”

Alton C. Thompson

The enslavement of cattle, horses, llamas, camels, dogs, cats, and other domesticated forms is reality concealed under a crust of sentimental nurturance. Speaking of biblical shepherds, for example, Calvin W. Schwabe, a veterinarian professor, has this to say [in an unpublished manuscript with no date]: “Sheep-culture peoples were probably the first to possess behavioral qualities we consider *humane* as distinguished from bestial. From the pastoral occupation of these roamers under the stars emerged the humanizing qualities of gentleness, caring, compassion, responsibility, nonviolence, and contemplation, and these values were consistent with development of an interest in healing and beginning acquisition of the manual skills of a healing art.” The word “designing” is used to describe the Hebrew attitude toward nature, and it applies to all those lamb-carrying figures in pastoral imagery. The lamb will not only lose its wool and possibly its milk but it will eventually have its throat cut. If this is the ultimate model and origin of human caring and compassion, then we all have reason to suspect our pastors, brother-keepers, and parents.

—Paul Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, p. 128.

[I love the way that (the late) Paul Shepard initially seemingly gave the impression that he believed that Schwabe was revealing a great truth about sheep-culture peoples—and then “lowered the boom” on Schwabe!]

So we have reason to suspect “our pastors, brother-keepers, and parents,” you claim? What could *possibly* be the basis for this claim, Dr. Shepard?! Were you just “putting us on” here or what?

I will be providing an answer to that question in this essay—but only indirectly, and only partially. Let us, then, “get on with it,” shall we?—by focusing specifically on church “services” in this essay. Focusing, that is, specifically on *Christian* church “services,” as I have known them during my 72+ years of life—although I suspect that much of what I write here will have pertinence for the religious meetings associated with other religions as well.

Let me begin here with a story that I read somewhere at some point in the past. It is about a Lutheran who consented to attend a religious meeting with a Quaker friend (i.e., a member of the Society of Friends). They entered the building where the meeting would be taking place, and seated themselves. After some passage of time, the Lutheran whispered to his Quaker friend, “*When* does the service begin?” The Quaker whispered, back, “After we *leave* this place.”

Here were two men, both of whom thought of themselves as “Christians,” but who had rather different (tacitly-held) assumptions regarding *what* should occur during the course of a religious meeting. The Lutheran assumed that a “proper” meeting would be strictly structured, involving a variety of activities, repeated from Sunday to Sunday (with some variation, however), but always featuring a *sermon* by a paid member of the clergy. The Quaker, in contrast, assumed that *no* clergy would be present (to ruin things?!), and that those in attendance would sit in silence until someone was “given” something to say—received a *revelation*, that is, to convey to the others present. That “revelation” would most likely provide some sort of *guidance* to those present as to what they should do the following week (and/or beyond)—with that “what” involving service *to one’s fellows*, “of course” (the Quaker might very well add).

Whereas for the *Lutheran*, a religious meeting *is* a “service,” for the *Quaker*, a religious meeting has a definite *purpose*—that of *preparing* those in attendance for service to others. That service might involve *individual* actions, actions with *fellow Quakers* (and/or non-Quakers), or *both*. An interesting difference in perspective, is it not?!

The above discussion—in conjunction with my essay’s title—may suggest that my sympathies lie with the Quaker discussed above, rather than with the Lutheran. And although my *leaning* is more toward the Quaker than the Lutheran, the fact of the matter is that I identify with *neither*. To express my views on the matter, however, I will begin here by assuming a hypothetical group, the members of which have chosen as the centerpiece of their “faith” the “plan of salvation” presented in the Matthew 25 passage that I quoted in “[The Blasphemy of Christmas](#).” I will assume that the members of this group will wish to meet with one another on a regular basis, so that they will be faced with the following two questions:

- What sorts of *purpose(s)/goal(s)* shall we establish for these meetings?
- How shall we *structure* our meetings to ensure, so far as possible, that our meetings will help us achieve the *purpose(s)/goal(s)* that we have established for ourselves?

Perhaps you have by now guessed “where I’m going” with this discussion: I am trying to establish a basis for *critiquing* existing (Christian) church “services”—which I have already declared (in my title) to be blasphemous! Having established that basis, I will then examine the “service” that I attended yesterday (December 9, 2012), and indicate *why* I regard it as blasphemous.

As I noted above, I will be using the “sheep and goats” passage from Matthew 25 as my starting point here, and my first task (as stated above) is to identify a *purpose*, or purposes, for the religious meetings contemplated. I assume that the members of the group already know their

raison d'être (i.e., using the Matthew 25 passage as a guide for their lives), and want their meetings to help them *realize* that reason for being. Let us assume that the members of this group jointly determine that the following should be the *immediate* goals of their meetings:

- *Bonding* between those who attend the meetings.
- Feelings of *empathy*—not only for those attending the meetings, but for those beyond the group.
- They should enable the simple sharing of *thoughts*—about whatever is on the minds of those in attendance.
- They should provide *intellectual stimulation*—conduce the development of *ideas* regarding what the members can and should *do*—either as individuals acting individually, or in concert with others (including non-members of the group)—as citizens of their community, their region, their country, the world, and the future.
- The achievement of an *altered state of consciousness*—by which I do *not*, however, mean the *emotional* expressionism associated with the meetings of “[pentecostal](#)” groups. Rather, I am referring to the sort of *mental state* in which one’s sense of separateness from other people (and beyond) dissolves, and in which one feels energized, etc. (I would add here that Paul of Tarsus, in his letters—e.g., Galatians 5:16 – 26—refers to “Spirit-filling,” and that I interpret such references as referring to what today would be thought of as experiencing an altered state of consciousness. A side note: In this Galatians passage Paul’s reference to “human nature” should be replaced with “socialized nature.” Living in a pre-scientific age, Paul can be excused for making this error.)

How should members of our hypothetical group *structure* their meetings to ensure that those meetings will help them achieve the above goals? I provide a detailed discussion of this matter in discussing the New Word Fellowship (NeWF) in “[Worship: An Exercise in Revisioning](#),” but in this essay the point that I would like to emphasize is for meetings to have any hope of achieving goals such as those listed above, meetings will need to be structured so that the emphasis is on *interaction*—the participants interacting one with another. Beyond this, meetings should be structured in such a way that *everyone* present (I’m referring here to the *adults* present, of course) is *encouraged* to participate, but that also all individuals are *discouraged* from dominating the discussion that takes place.

Interestingly, Brian Anderson's "[Discovering Participatory Church Meetings](#)" not only *advocates* such meetings, but provides a solid *Biblical basis* for such meetings. Thus, the purposes/goals that I stated above can be thought of as all having an at least *implicit* Biblical basis!—a dangerous thought as I go about my next task, analyzing the church “service” that I attended yesterday. First, though, I need to describe that “service.” Here is a listing of what comprised it:

1. Welcome and announcements.

We Come to Worship God

2. Piano prelude (normally it is an organ prelude, but the organist was “off” today).
3. Call to worship.
4. Hymn

We Light the Advent Wreath

5. Hymn response.

We Confess our Sinfulness and Receive Forgiveness

6. Call to confession.
7. Prayer of confession.
8. Silent personal confession.
9. Sung response.
10. Assurance of forgiveness.
11. Sung response.
12. Passing of the peace (i.e., one gets up from one's seat and greets those around one).

We Hear God's Word

13. A time for children.
14. Prayer for illumination.
15. Old Testament lesson (Malachi 3:1 – 4).
16. Sung response.
17. Gospel lesson. (Luke 3:1 – 6).
18. Sermon.
19. Hymn.

We Respond Through Prayer and Offerings

20. Minute for mission.
21. Sharing of joys and concerns.
22. Sung prayer request.
23. Prayers of the people, and the Lord's Prayer.
24. Presentation of tithes, gifts, and offerings.

25. Offertory (piano music).
26. Doxology.
27. Prayer of dedication.
- 28.

We Go Out to Serve

29. Hymn.
30. Charge and benediction.
31. Piano postlude.

The first thing to notice about this meeting is that it involved little interaction among those present—the “passing of the peace” period being the only one involving interaction *during the meeting* (there is, of course, social interaction during the “coffee hour” that follows the meeting), with that interaction being of a very superficial—thus meaningless—sort. During the adult class that preceded the meeting there was interaction, but *that* meeting was structured—inadvertently, I would assume—so as to prevent meaningful interaction. Thus, between the two meetings (the adult class, and the “religious” meeting) little meaningful interaction occurred.

The meetings provided little basis for *bonding* to occur, although this was less true of the adult class. Bonding can only occur if individuals have *experiences* with others, and the religious meeting provided only a trivial experience (brief greetings), and the adult class was too leader-directed to enable much meaningful interaction.

Given that the Matthew 25 passage referred to earlier “cries out” for elaboration in a way that would be meaningful for “the times” and a particular group of people, a *sermon* can potentially do this, and thereby be of some value. However, the sermon that I heard yesterday (“Stop, Drop & Roll”) not only had little relevance for the Matthew 25 passage, but exhibited other problems as well:

- The passage in Luke that had been read referred to the need to change one’s direction (in terms of [*metanoia*](#)), and the pastor could have added—but did not—that a problem in our society is not just the *individualistic* problem to changing the direction of *one’s own* life, but the need for *others*—our leaders in particular—to change *their* direction. There is, then, the relevant *societal* question of what one should do to convince *others* to change *their* behavior—write letters, engage in protest marches, etc.? After all, their decisions are affecting all of us.
- As the title of her sermon suggests, she made reference to some of the dangers associated with fires, but made no reference to the most significant problem—created by the *burning*

of fossil fuels—that we humans face today, that of global warming! I find this incredible—especially given I that I have sent her several of my essays on this matter.

- She gave the impression that she looks at world history as *progressive*, given the fact that developments of a technological nature usually *seem* to be “advances.” Evidently she is unaware of what [Sigmund Freud](#) and [Thorstein Veblen](#), among others, have stated regarding this matter. More broadly (no pun intended, of course), it’s obvious that her thinking is very conventional—i.e., she is very much a part of the mainstream of thinking in this society, she is very much embedded in this society.

With any religious meetings, regardless of how structured, a certain level of *decorum* is expected; and in the case of those meetings that feature sermons, this is maintained by not allowing those present to ask questions (because the pastor might not be able to answer them!) or to voice challenges to what the pastor has said (because the pastor might not be able to respond to them adequately!). An unwritten rule is that the pastor must not be embarrassed—a rule that ensures that the pastor will say little of importance, and may even put some of those present to sleep!

If the religious meeting that I attended yesterday did little to promote the message of Matthew 25, and was by no means *structured* in a fashion to do so, the question arises: What purposes did it serve, then—if but *inadvertently* (for I’m not sure if the meeting had any *consciously planned* purposes of note!). Likely there were a number of purposes served, among them the following:

- Some in attendance may have held the belief that they needed to attend a church regularly so as to avoid spending eternity in a very warm place. For such people, their attendance provided them with some psychological benefit—of a “religious” nature.
- Some may have been attending for personal reasons other than “religious” ones—e.g., they like singing in the choir, they may be seeking clients, they may be seeking a potential spouse, etc.—and may or may not have those intentions fulfilled through their attendance.
- The pastor was provided with employment (something that would not happen, were she a Quaker!). And as there was a business meeting that immediately followed the “religious” one, I learned that she is being rewarded rather handsomely in her position (compared, e.g., to what *I* am being compensated for in working for an avionics corporation in the private sector).

- From a societal standpoint, the “religious” meeting did nothing to challenge the existing societal system *status quo*. Given that it’s clear to me that the pastor’s thinking is strictly of a conventional nature, that is by no means surprising. I even doubt that “societal system” is a part of her vocabulary!

In summary, in my epigraph I quoted the late Paul Shepard to the effect that we “have reason to suspect our pastors . . .” Shepard’s point (if I am discerning it properly) was that we should suspect our pastors of being ignorant—having educations that are too narrowly theological and denominational. I agree with Shepard on this point (as I indicate above), but would add that we have good reason for suspecting that they are diverting our attention from what matters—the Matthew 25 passage being what is for me a good example. This failure may be inadvertent on this part—but it is still a failure. For not only do our pastors fail to enlighten us as to what we should be doing *beyond* our personal lives, they don’t even do *that* well! And although they are in a *position* to control our experiences during religious meetings at least, they don’t take *advantage* of the “powers” invested in them.

What seemingly motivates most of them is to do that which will attract new members to their congregation, and prevent current members from leaving. This is not only *pathetic*, but *blasphemous*, in my judgment! In my earlier “[Going to Church is a Sin](#),” my focus was on global warming, and the fact that our traveling—including to and from church—adds carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. In this essay I add that going to church is worse than useless! (Why, then, do I attend? “Family peace” is my brief answer!)